

The New Jersey Poison Information & Education System — Serving New Jersey Since 1983

NEWS RELEASE

For Immediate Release
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Safety, Sanitizing and Social Distancing Poison Control Center Urges Safe Use of COVID Prevention Products

WARNING: The New Jersey Poison Control Center warns of a surge in calls related to chemical products used to prevent the spread of COVID-19 (novel coronavirus). Products must only be used according to the directions on the label – misuse can result in potentially dangerous health effects. If you have questions or an emergency regarding something you ate, touched or smelled, immediately contact the medical professionals at the New Jersey Poison Control Center, 1-800-222-1222 (24/7, free, confidential, information in any language).

(Newark, NJ) – Since Governor Murphy enacted his stay-at-home order last month, New Jersey residents have been stockpiling household cleaners and disinfectants used to prevent the spread of COVID-19 on high-touch surfaces. Although these products are important to have on-hand and are safe to use when following their directions, increased use and accessibility significantly increase the risk for mishaps, misuse, and mistaken identity exposures. From youngest to oldest, all people including their pets are at risk for unintentional poisonings.

According to a recent [study](#) published in the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report (MMWR), U.S. Poison Control Centers have seen a 20% increase in chemical exposure calls related to cleaning and disinfecting chemicals for the period of January–March 2020 as compared to the same time periods in 2018 and 2019. From youngest to oldest, all people including their pets are at risk for unintentional poisonings.

"Anything can be a potential poison, including the household products families are using to prevent coronavirus infection," says Diane Calello, MD, executive and medical director of the [New Jersey Poison Control Center](#) at [Rutgers New Jersey Medical School's](#) Department of Emergency Medicine. "Not following a product's directions is a recipe for disaster. Potential household dangers involve more than just medicines, also vitamins and supplements, cleaners and sanitizers, soaps and detergents, sprays and disinfectants, and more. All products have the potential to cause poisoning injuries when used in the wrong way, wrong amount, or by the wrong person. Whether we carry products with us or keep them at home, they can cause serious life-threatening injuries and even death when misused."

Most poisonings are preventable, therefore it's important to focus your attention on identifying and preventing potential hazards at home. "The COVID-19 pandemic drastically changed our daily lives and routines, in turn creating a perfect storm for poisoning injuries. More time at home, more stress, more distractions, and more access to potentially dangerous household products results in an increased risk of

poisoning,” says Calello. Since sheltering in place is an essential component in preventing the further spread of COVID-19, it is important to stay focused and pay attention to what’s happening in the household, especially when children and pets are present. Unintentional/accidental poisoning injuries often occur in plain sight.

“Take a few minutes today to learn how to reduce your family’s risk of serious injury. A few minutes today may save a loved one tomorrow,” says Calello.

The New Jersey Poison Control Center recommends the following tips to prevent poisoning injuries during the COVID19 pandemic:

- **Be prepared for an emergency.** Do not guess, every minute counts in poisoning situations. Save the Poison Control Center’s contact information in your phone, 1-800-222-1222 | www.njpies.org. Call FAST to treat a poisoning - Call FIRST to prevent one! Through its telemedicine capabilities, the Poison Control Center keeps thousands of residents each year out of emergency department/rooms across the state. This is especially important right now as hospitals are overwhelmed with treating severely ill COVID-19 patients.
- **Practice safe storage habits.** Store potentially poisonous products like medicines, vitamins and supplements, disinfecting wipes and sprays, cleaning chemicals, and hand sanitizer in their original packaging/containers with labels. Keep them away from food and drink items as mistaken identity can lead to poisonings. All items should be stored up out of sight and reach of children and pets.
- **Read and follow the directions on the label.** Review directions on a product’s labels before each use. When taking medicine, it’s important to follow the dosing instructions exactly as written to prevent overdose – right amount, at the right time, for the right person. For liquid medicine, only use a dosing device (syringe or cup) not a kitchen/soup spoon. Using a household spoon increases the risk of a dosing error – either too much medicine or not enough. Drinking alcoholic beverages while also taking medicine is extremely dangerous, as the combination may cause a serious and even fatal drug interaction.
- **Use one cleaning or disinfecting product at a time.** Cleaning and disinfecting products are safe to use when following the label’s directions. When used in the wrong way, these products have the potential to cause serious health effects. Disinfectants, such as bleach, ammonia, vinegar, as well as other brand-name disinfectants (like Lysol, Clorox disinfecting wipes) can be safely used on non-porous surfaces for disinfection, but should never be ingested or used on skin. When applying, wear gloves to protect your skin and open windows/turn on fans for added ventilation as fumes can be overpowering if used in tight spaces. It is extremely dangerous to mix cleaning/disinfecting products together as it can form a toxic gas, putting you at risk for breathing problems and lung injuries. For example, products that contain bleach should never be mixed with products that contain ammonia or acids (vinegars, drain cleaners, rust removers, etc.).

- **Check active ingredients on over-counter medicines.** Take only one medicine at a time with the same active ingredient. Many medicines contain the same active ingredients, even if they have different names and/or intended purposes. Taking these together, even if each is in the intended dose, can result in serious health consequences including liver damage.
- **Self-medicating to prevent COVID-19 infection is dangerous.** Currently, there are NO vaccines, treatments, medicines, vitamins, supplements or other products approved to prevent, treat or cure COVID-19 infection. Not everything you read on the internet is credible. Although the use of some over-the-counter medications can be helpful in alleviating mild symptoms of COVID-19, ingesting unapproved products and chemicals such as disinfectants puts you at significant risk for poisoning and death. Best way to prevent illness is to avoid being exposed to the virus – practice social distancing, proper handwashing, safely clean and disinfect frequently touched surfaces, do not touch your eyes, nose or mouth, cover your coughs and sneezes with your bent elbow, and wearing PPE (Personal Protective Equipment) when near sick people or leaving your home.
- **Supervise kids when using hand sanitizer.** Hand sanitizers have a high alcohol content, often higher than most alcoholic beverages – beer, wine and hard liquor. Although the high percentage of alcohol is necessary to effectively kill germs, these products are safe to use as long as the directions are followed. when following the directions. Hand sanitizer should never replace washing hands with soap and water, as this is always the best line of defense against germs. If using hand sanitizer, make sure the product has more than 60% alcohol to ensure it kills germs. Children should never be allowed to use hand sanitizer without adult supervision as it can be extremely dangerous if they swallow a gulp of gel (more than a lick). Alcohol affects children differently than it does adults – it does not take much to cause serious and potentially irreversible health effects of alcohol poisoning. Keep these products up high and out of sight and reach. Pets are also at risk for alcohol poisoning from ingesting hand sanitizer.
- **Prepare and serve food safely.** Although anyone is susceptible to food poisoning, the effects may be more serious for certain groups like young children, pregnant women, and those with weakened immune systems. When bringing groceries home, put away refrigerated and frozen foods immediately to prevent bacteria growth. Wash raw foods like produce with water, but never with cleaning/disinfecting chemicals and products. Using such products on food may cause you to ingest those chemicals, which are not meant for human consumption. Remember to wash hands with soap and water before and after handling raw food. If you have any kind of respiratory illness or infection, including coronavirus, do not prepare or serve food to others as this puts them at significant risk of becoming sick.

Safety is no accident, it's a choice. It's far easier to prevent a tragedy than to treat one. In the event a poisoning emergency should occur, residents can have peace of mind in knowing that the state's poison control center is available 24/7 to help with the most routine poison exposures as well as the unusual. Call

(1-800-222-1222), Text (973-339-0702), or [Chat](#) via our website. If someone is unconscious, not breathing, hard to wake up, or having a seizure, call 9-1-1 immediately.

Are you a New Jersey resident looking for information on novel coronavirus (COVID-19)? There are three options available 24/7 — Call **2-1-1**; Call **1-800-962-1253** (the NJ Poison Center); or Text: **NJCOVID to 898-211**.

Help is Just a Phone Call Away!

Stay Connected: Facebook ([@NJPIES](#)) and Twitter ([@NJPoisonCenter](#)) for breaking news, safety tips, trivia questions, etc.

Real People. Real Answers.

Available for Media Interviews

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About New Jersey Poison Control Center / NJPIES, 1-800-222-1222

Chartered in 1983, the New Jersey Poison Information & Education System (NJPIES), known to the public as the New Jersey Poison Control Center, is the state's primary defense against injury and deaths from intentional and unintentional poisonings. It is designated as the state's regional poison control center by the New Jersey Department of Health and the American Association of Poison Control Centers. It is a division of the Department of Emergency Medicine at Rutgers New Jersey Medical School. NJPIES has a state-of-the-art center located at Rutgers Biomedical and Health Sciences in Newark. NJPIES is funded, in part, by the NJ Department of Health, NJ Hospitals and the United States Department of Health and Human Services.

Hotline staff (physicians, registered nurses, and pharmacists) provide free, telemedicine consultation through hotline services (telephone, text, chat) regarding poison emergencies and provide information on poison prevention practices, drug interactions and overdoses, food poisoning, environmental chemical exposures, animal/insect bites and stings, plant and other outdoor exposures, carbon monoxide and lead poisonings, and more. NJPIES' services are free, confidential/private, available 24/7, and help is available in any language. Call 1-800-222-1222; Text 973-339-0702; [Chat](#). Stay Connected: [FB](#) / [Twitter](#) / [Website](#)

About Rutgers New Jersey Medical School

Founded in 1954, Rutgers New Jersey Medical School is the oldest school of medicine in the state. Today it is part of Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey and graduates approximately 170 physicians a year. In addition to providing the MD degree, the school offers MD/PhD, MD/MPH and MD/MBA degrees through collaborations with other institutions of higher education. Dedicated to excellence in education, research, clinical care and community outreach, the medical school comprises 20 academic departments and works with several healthcare partners, including its principal teaching hospital, University Hospital. Its faculty consists of numerous world-renowned scientists and many of the region's "top doctors." Home to the nation's oldest student-run clinic, New Jersey Medical School hosts more than 50 centers and institutes, including the Public Health Research Institute Center, the Global Tuberculosis Institute and the Neurological Institute of New Jersey. For more information please visit: njms.rutgers.edu.

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