

OLDER ADULT POISON PREVENTION

Prevention Strategies During the COVID-19 Pandemic

WASHINGTON POISON CENTER
APRIL 2020

Higher risk of severe illness from COVID-19 places increased importance on social distancing for older adults (ages 60 and older). For many older adults, however, the changes stemming from social distancing measures are decreasing access to basic needs and services, disrupting daily routines, and causing isolation, stress and anxiety. All of these changes place older adults at higher risk of poisoning, both accidental and intentional.

Strategies for older adults to mitigate poison risks during the COVID-19 pandemic are summarized below. Further risk and strategy explanations are available in an extended guide, located at: <https://www.wapc.org/wp-content/uploads/WAPC-Older-Adult-COVID-Poison-Prevention-Guide.pdf>.

MEDICATION ERRORS

Changes to daily routines, distractions, stress, and potentially decreased caregiver support may increase risk of medication errors, such as double dosing or taking the wrong medication.

- **Use a physical system to track when medications are taken**, such as a medication checklist, cell phone reminder app, or pill box.
- **Keep medications in their original containers or pill box**, never loose.
- **Store medications in separate locations or add labeling** to differentiate between the medications of different household members and pets.
- To prevent double dosing, **read medication labels closely** (especially dosing recommendations and ingredients).
- **Add labeling** (stickers, tape, permanent marker, etc.) **to clearly differentiate between "look-a-like" products**.
- **Call the Poison Helpline** with any questions about medications, dosing, or if a medication error occurs.

SELF-MEDICATING

There are currently NO approved medications, vitamins, or other substances to treat or prevent COVID-19. Using products that claim to do so can have serious or even life-threatening effects.

- **Talk to your doctor/pharmacist or call the Poison Helpline before taking a new medication, vitamin, or supplement.** Ask about any health or safety considerations specific to your health and current medication.
- **Never ingest disinfectants (like bleach) or non-pharmaceutical substances that claim to prevent or treat COVID-19.** Call the Poison Helpline if you are unsure if a substance is safe.

CLEANERS & DISINFECTANTS

- **Read and follow all directions and safety warnings.**
- **Open windows and doors** to ensure adequate ventilation.
- **Wear gloves** when using products.
- **Do not mix** cleaning products, and be careful cleaning with different products back-to-back. Mixing products can produce toxic gases.
- **Store** cleaners, household chemicals, and other potentially harmful products in their **original containers**.
- **Label products** with Mr. Yuk stickers or other quickly identifiable labeling that shows a product may be unsafe.
- **Store products up high and out of reach** of young children.

GRANDPARENTS

Some older adults may be helping with childcare, which can pose poison risks for both the older adult AND the child.

- **Take medications out of sight of children.**
- **Check the carpet/floors for dropped medication.**
- **Use medication management strategies to ensure distractions and new daily routines do not lead to medication errors.**
- **Store all medications, cleaners, sanitizers, and other potentially harmful substances out of sight and out of reach of young children.**
- **Always supervise children when using hand sanitizer.** Hand sanitizer has high alcohol content, and can lead to alcohol poisoning in children if ingested. Call the Poison Helpline immediately if hand sanitizer is ingested.

INTENTIONAL USE

COVID-19-related isolation and stress may place even more older adults at risk of developing or increasing anxiety and depression, which in turn may increase use of substances and/or risk of self-harm or suicide.

- **Take a break from the news.**
- **Set up regular communication** with family members and friends. With so much uncertainty, it is helpful to establish periods of certainty, connection, and support.
- **Reconnect** with organizations or social connections that were an important part of your life pre-COVID-19 pandemic. Many of these organizations are setting up ways to support their members virtually, over the phone, or through other means.
- If you or someone you know needs emotional support or is thinking of suicide, contact the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-8255. For immediate help after self-harm, call 911.

For help with any questions or emergencies with potential poisons,

CALL THE POISON HELPLINE AT 1-800-222-1222.

The helpline is available 24/7/365, even during this pandemic.
All calls are free and confidential.

Find additional COVID-19 resources and information at:
<https://www.wapc.org/programs/covid-19-resources-information/>