

Danger Lurks Inside Most Medicine Chests

by Steven B. Machtinger, M.D.

Recently the Warm Springs community has witnessed tragic deaths and near deaths due to overdoses of drugs. While part of this problem is due to the illicit use of street drugs, the clinic has seen some overdoses caused by drugs found at home in the medicine chest. Most of us have given little thought to the potential dangers behind that small, mirrored door in the bathroom. Yet in most every medicine chest may be found an arsenal of poisons, dangerous medications, and even weapons.

If there are small children in the home, the potential for medicine chest catastrophe is enhanced. The pre-school child is fascinated by the things that come out of this little closet. The challenge of examining its contents is irresistible to the two year-old child who reaches the medicine cabinet by climbing from the toilet and then to the sink. Razor blades, iodine, prescription drugs such as tranquilizers and pain killers, even aspirins and cold remedies can be the cause of serious injury or death in the wrong hands.

A child encouraged to take his medicine by being told it is candy may swallow the entire contents of a prescription bottle in a few minutes. The most common cause of poisoning in children is from aspirin. Overdose results in symptoms of bleeding, excitation, sleepiness, and rapid breathing. Death may result from an upsetting of the body's carefully regulated acidity. As few as 20 adult aspirin tablets swallowed by a two-year-old at one time may cause death.

Vitamins containing iron, cold tablets, and of course, poisons like antiseptics and bathroom cleansers stored in the medicine cabinet can each cause death in old-timers as well as toddlers. Dad's safety razor in a child's hands is not a safe tool.

Short of poisoning, drugs found in medicine chests are frequently misused in other ways. When a family member has a symptom of illness similar to one for which another person has received medication in the past, it is often tempting to give the sick person some of the other person's medicine. This is a bad practice for several reasons.

One person may be coughing from a cold, another from pneumonia, a third from a weak heart, a fourth from asthma. The medicine for one will not help the problems of the other. This



Most of us have given little thought to the potential dangers behind that small mirrored door. A two year-old child can reach the medicine cabinet by climbing from the toilet and then to the sink.

pain. We prefer Tylenol for children, as it is safer. For most adults aspirin is a good choice, especially because it's good for aches and pains of arthritis and muscle soreness. If aspirin is used only occasionally at home, there is no reason to buy the large bottle, as by the time you get to the bottom the last pills will have lost their strength.

Cold remedies, such as Actifed, Dimetapp and Robitussin, can also be kept in the medicine chest and used when needed. Mild laxatives, such as Colace and Milk of Magnesia, diarrheal medicines, such as Kaopectate, and medicines for acid stomach, such as Maalox and Peptobismol, are all relatively safe. These can be kept on the lower shelf of the medicine chest. If a small child were to take one of these medicines, it would be unlikely to cause a serious illness. Ex-Lax and Donnagel should be kept on a top shelf out of reach of curious hands. Lomotil is a dangerous drug that should be thrown away after the patient with diarrhea has recovered.

Every home should have some first aid material, such as bandages, bandaids, adhesive tape, and a clean handkerchief for controlling bleeding. These can be kept on a lower shelf. Antiseptics like hydrogen peroxide and iodine should be kept up high out of reach.

Prescription drugs taken everyday, such as diabetes medicine and high blood pressure pills, should also be stored on the high shelves of medicine chests. Perhaps a safer place for them would be in a drawer used by the person taking that drug. Such medicines should be kept in the back of the drawer away from the easy reach of young children. Drugs should never be left on counters or tables around the house.

Syrup of Ipecac is a liquid medicine that causes vomiting. If the person is given this syrup shortly after taking an overdose of pills, the Ipecac will produce vomiting of the undigested drugs. It is a good antidote for overdoses of pills and may be kept in the medicine chest and used for such emergencies. The correct use of Ipecac will be described in a future article.

Making your home and medicine chest safe is really an easy thing that takes little time. It is the kind of thing a person can do to ensure the health of himself and of his loved ones.

doesn't mean you shouldn't give your daughter your son's cough medicine when they both have a cold, but it should remind us to use common sense. Over-the-counter drugs should be used as stated in the directions. Prescription drugs should only be used by the patient whose name is written on the bottle.

When drugs are stored for long periods of time, they lose their potency. This is true of antibiotics and especially for the liquid antibiotics. Amoxicillin, even when stored in the refrigerator, will have lost most of its potency within three weeks after leaving the pharmacy. To give someone medicine that has been

stored in the medicine cabinet for a long time may do nothing to help him feel better, but may make him worse.

Many drugs cause side effects, such as vomiting, stomach cramps and rashes. Even after a drug's potency is gone, it may still cause side-effects. Good sense tells us what we should and shouldn't keep in our medicine chest. Any old medicine should be thrown away. Even aspirin loses its potency after two or three years and should be replaced with a fresh supply.

When a patient is done with a prescription medicine and there are a few pills left over, they

should be thrown away, too. Old drugs can be flushed down the toilet or placed in the garbage can outside the house. The clinic will run a door-to-door old drugs collection drive sometime this spring. The medicines collected will be disposed of properly and safely.

Cleansers, poisons, Drano and old razor blades should not be kept in the medicine chest. They should be stored in another safe place or disposed of if there is no need for them.

What should be kept at home for simple illnesses and first-aid measures? Aspirin and Tylenol are good drugs for relief of fever, headaches and mild to moderate

Public Notices

As required by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the following notices are posted on behalf of the local Headstart and Day Care Programs.

"The Warm Springs Head Start Program announces the sponsorship of the USDA Child Care Food Program. Meals will be made available to enrolled children at no separate charge without regard to race, color, or national origin. +Meals will be provided at the sites listed below:

Warm Springs Head Start Program Community Center

The Warm Springs Head Start - Day Care Program announces the sponsorship of the USDA Child Care Food Program. Meals will be made available to enrolled children at no separate charge without regard to race, color, or national origin. +Meals will be provided at the sites listed below:

Warm Springs Head Start - Day Care Program
Head Start - Day Care Trailer

Cancer Crusade Week April 16-20

Contribution envelopes available at Macy's Store

Cancer is one of the most curable of all major diseases... if it's detected in time. The earlier cancer is detected, the better the chances for cure. If YOU have a warning signal, see your doctor promptly.

THE SEVEN WARNING SIGNALS

1. Change in bowel or bladder habits
2. A sore that does not heal
3. Unusual bleeding or discharge
4. Thickening or lump in breast or elsewhere
5. Indigestion or difficulty in swallowing
6. Obvious change in wart or mole
7. Nagging cough or hoarseness

Call your local ACS Unit for more information.