

For Immediate Release

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Hand Sanitizer Gel: A Common Sense Approach

The Washington Poison Center has become aware of recent concerns about hand sanitizers and the remote danger associated with them. Unfortunately, an e-mail has been circulating alleging that a child had developed serious alcohol toxicity after licking small amounts of instant hand sanitizer gel from her hands. This e-mail shares many characteristics with urban legend reports – no contact information, no location, no actual date, and the “technical” information reported is not reported in standard language. Whether or not the incident actually occurred really remains to be determined. The only credible published report of toxicity from hand sanitizers was reported earlier this year in the New England Journal of Medicine where 2 adult chronic alcoholics intentionally consumed the alcohol containing gel.

Some concerned adults have now called for the removal of hand gel dispensers from classrooms and childcare settings. However, Dr. William Hurley, new Medical Director of the Washington Poison Center, disagrees. “Hand sanitizers are effective in controlling the spread of infections. They are useful in schools and health-care facilities. They are not dangerous unless purposely misused. Unfortunately, like so many other things in our world, they come with some cautions. Misuse of them, especially drinking or eating them, should be avoided. They could poison you or your child.” This echoes the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommendation that children “wash their hands...especially after coughing or sneezing. If water is not available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer” as prevention against influenza. In a 2005 study, alcohol-based hand gel use was associated with reduced respiratory illness transmission among family members in the homes of children enrolled in childcare.

Most hand sanitizer gels contain 60 to 90% ethanol; the same type of “alcohol” that is present in beer, wine, and liquor and is also found in perfume, aftershave, astringents, and mouthwash. An average sized 5 year old would have to ingest nearly 6 teaspoons of hand sanitizer to cause toxicity. This amount is much more than would ever be used to clean hands. Licking the routinely used amount from hands should not cause toxicity.

Of 656 unintentional childhood ingestions of alcohol containing hand sanitizer products reported to the Washington Poison Center since January 2006, only 25 cases showed minor toxicity such as coughing / choking, oral / throat irritation, or vomiting.

Experts at the Washington Poison Center recommend these safety guidelines for schools, camps, and childcare settings:

- Place a Mr. Yuk sticker on the hand sanitizer bottle and keep it stored out of reach and view.
- Always supervise young children when using hand sanitizer gel. It should always be dispensed by an adult.
- Never transfer hand sanitizer to an unmarked container.

Keep the toll free number to the Washington Poison Center near every phone. If a child swallows hand sanitizer (or any other product), call the Washington Poison Center at **1-800-222-1222** right away for free, confidential, medical advice. Bring the product to the phone so the label is accessible.

www.wapc.org

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The Washington Poison Center, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit charitable organization, prevents harm from poisoning through expertise, collaboration and professional and public education. Reachable 24/7, the national poison hotline, 1-800-222-1222, will connect you to specially-trained pharmacists, nurses and poison specialists. Poison help is always free and confidential. Services are available for people with hearing problems and for non-English speakers.