

Contact the Washington Poison Center 24/7/365 at 1 (800) 222-1222

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Benadryl™ Challenge & Diphenhydramine Overdose

The Washington Poison Center is warning healthcare providers and parents of a dangerous trend in adolescent intentional overdose called the “Benadryl™ Challenge,” which encourages individuals to induce hallucinations by ingesting large amounts of Benadryl™ (diphenhydramine). Communication and sharing of this “challenge” began early summer 2020 and is primarily spread on social media. Adolescents across the United States have been affected—the Washington Poison Center confirmed its third case requiring hospitalization last week. Intentional harm from diphenhydramine is not a new concern; the Washington Poison Center has tracked significant increases in diphenhydramine misuse, abuse, and intentional overdose among adolescents since 2011. Given the COVID-19 pandemic, this challenge and trends in intentional use are especially concerning.

DIPHENHYDRAMINE

Diphenhydramine is an antihistamine commonly found in over-the-counter sleep aids, cough and cold medications, and allergy medications—most notably including the brand name Benadryl™. Medications with diphenhydramine come in liquid or pill format.

CONCERNS

- As a common over-the-counter medication, diphenhydramine is easily accessible and obtainable. In many homes, it is typically stored in an unsecured or unlocked cabinet. Moreover, bulk quantities of diphenhydramine are available for purchase. These factors allow ease of access for adolescents.
- Exposures to diphenhydramine frequently result in the adolescent needing medical attention. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this presents an infrastructure concern, with the potential for COVID-19 transmission and further strain on already over-taxed emergency and hospital services.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has also escalated mental health concerns. Cases of intentional self-harm or suicidal intent in adolescents ages 13-17 has increased 5% since 2019, and cases of abuse have increased 34%. Both exposure categories predominantly involve common over-the-counter medications, including antihistamines, acetaminophen, and ibuprofen. [View data here.](#)

SIGNS & SYMPTOMS

In acute cases, diphenhydramine poisoning is extremely dangerous, leading to blurry vision, confusion, seizures, coma, serious heart dysrhythmias, and possibly death from blocking the normal electrical activity of the heart.

TREATMENT

For immediate assistance, call the Washington Poison Center ([1-800-222-1222](tel:1-800-222-1222)) to consult with our poison information specialists and physician Medical Toxicologists for further treatment recommendations. Special antidotal treatment may be necessary in certain individuals.

SAFETY

- Remind children and adolescents that “over-the-counter” does not equate to safe or harmless. When used incorrectly or inappropriately, these medications can have harmful effects.
- Limit the amount of over-the-counter medications kept in the home, or have only small quantities available and accessible to household members.
- Store over-the-counter medications out of sight and out of reach of young children. Consider storing all medications in a locked cabinet or lock box.
- Properly dispose of unneeded, unwanted or expired medications. For free, secure medicine return locations across Washington state, visit takebackyourmeds.org.

For questions or emergencies involving diphenhydramine or other potentially harmful substances, call the Washington Poison Center ([1-800-222-1222](tel:1-800-222-1222)). If someone has lost consciousness or is having trouble breathing, call [9-1-1](tel:9-1-1).