

The Washington Poison and Drug Information Center (WAPC) is frequently asked, "What's the difference between a poisoning and an exposure?" or "What does an exposure actually entail?" These questions and the answers to them may have a greater impact on the public and healthcare professionals than meets the eye. According to the National Poison Data System (NPDS) Coding Users' Manual, an exposure is defined as:

Actual or *suspected* contact with any substance which has been ingested, inhaled, absorbed, applied to, or injected into the body, regardless of toxicity or clinical manifestation.

Examples include a child whose parents found her with an empty pill bottle on the floor and thought she ingested some, only to find the missing pills under the sofa later; the young adult who gets bitten by a rattlesnake hiking in Yakima; to the older adult who experiences dizziness and faints after starting a new blood pressure medication. Exposures can occur anytime in a person's life; therefore, an exposure can happen to anyone and at any time.

Poisonings happen when the exposure results in an adverse health reaction; when a substance interferes with *normal body functions* after it is swallowed, inhaled, injected, or absorbed. Examples of poisonings would include someone developing bleeding problems after a snake bite; paranoia and anxiety after smoking marijuana; a greater than expected drop in blood pressure after an accidental double dose of blood pressure pills. The branch of medicine that deals with poisons is called toxicology.

An easy way to remember the difference between a poisoning and exposure is this...

All poisonings are exposures, but not all exposures are poisonings.

The nurses, pharmacists and toxicologists at the Washington Poison and Drug Information Center are trained to identify the risks after an exposure and what preventative action may be taken. Our staff come to us with backgrounds in emergency medicine, critical care, pharmacy, and other medical disciplines. When you call the WAPC, you can take comfort knowing that the medical professional who helps you has years of training and experience in the world of toxicology. We can help you identify an exposure, determine the risk of poisoning, and then how you may safely lessen that risk.

In 2014, the WAPC received over 63,000 calls, averaging over 174 calls per day. Of the 63,000 calls, 54,715 were human exposures. Human exposures with a more serious outcome (moderate, major or death) occurred in approximately 6% of all exposures in 2014.

***Disclaimer: Reporting of exposures to the poison center is voluntary and not mandated by law. As such, WAPC data describes the number of calls called into the poison center and most likely is an underrepresentation of the true occurrence of any one substance. All calls to the Washington Poison Center are free and confidential.**

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