CONDITION

Beeswax poisoning

Learn what happens when beeswax is swallowed, which symptoms need urgent care, and how ingestion, allergy, burns, and product additives are managed.

WHAT IT IS
Harmful effects from beeswax or product exposure

BODY SYSTEM
Digestive system, airways and skin

MAIN SYMPTOMS
Abdominal pain, vomiting, difficulty breathing, itchy rash

WHAT CAUSES IT
Beeswax ingestion, allergy, burns or additives

HOW IT IS DIAGNOSED
Exposure history and symptom-based assessment

MAIN TREATMENT
Supportive care and complication-specific treatment

CAN IT BE CURED?
Yes, once exposure complications are treated

IS IT AN EMERGENCY?
Sometimes, choking or trouble breathing

LONG-TERM OUTLOOK
Usually good unless airway or intestinal blockage occurs

Overview

Beeswax is a natural wax made by honeybees. It is used in some candles, lip balms, cosmetics, ointments, food coatings, furniture polishes, and craft products.

Pure beeswax is generally considered nontoxic when used as intended. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration allows beeswax in certain foods under good manufacturing practices. Accidentally swallowing a small amount, such as a taste of a beeswax candle or lip balm, often causes no symptoms.

The term "beeswax poisoning" can therefore be misleading. The main concern is usually not a chemical poison. A large piece or a large amount of wax may cause choking or create a blockage in the digestive tract because the body does not digest wax well. Other concerns include an allergic reaction, a burn from melted wax, or exposure to ingredients mixed with the

wax.

The exact product matters. A beeswax candle may also contain fragrance, dye, essential oils, or other types of wax. Furniture treatments and industrial products may contain solvents or other chemicals that are more harmful than beeswax itself. A poison center can assess the complete ingredient list and the amount involved.

Symptoms

A small accidental ingestion of pure beeswax may cause no symptoms. Some people may develop mild nausea, stomach discomfort, or loose stools.

Swallowing a large solid piece may cause choking. Warning signs include an inability to speak or cough effectively, difficulty breathing, or a blue or gray color around the lips. Choking is an emergency.

Because wax does not dissolve easily in the digestive tract, a large amount could contribute to an intestinal obstruction, meaning that material cannot move normally through the intestines. Possible symptoms include:

These symptoms require prompt medical assessment. They should not be managed only with home laxatives.

Beeswax-containing skin or lip products may cause contact dermatitis in a sensitive person. Contact dermatitis is an inflamed, itchy skin reaction that develops after contact with a substance. Symptoms may include redness, itching, scaling, cracking, or swelling where the product was applied. Residual propolis, a resin-like material that bees collect from plants, may sometimes be responsible for the reaction.

A severe immediate allergic reaction is different from contact dermatitis. Call emergency services for trouble breathing, throat or tongue swelling, faintness, or rapidly spreading hives, especially when more than one part of the body is affected.

Hot melted beeswax can cause a thermal burn. Burning pain, redness, blistering, or pale or charred skin reflects heat injury rather than poisoning. Breathing smoke from a burning candle is also a separate exposure and may irritate the eyes or airways.

- Increasing or severe abdominal pain
- A swollen or firm abdomen
- Repeated vomiting
- Inability to pass stool or gas

- Persistent constipation after a substantial ingestion

Causes and risk factors

Beeswax exposure most often happens when a child tastes or bites a candle, a person accidentally swallows a cosmetic product, or someone mistakes a wax-containing household product for food. Intentional repeated eating of nonfood items can also lead to a larger exposure.

Factors that may increase the chance of complications include:

The label is important. "Beeswax" on the front of a package does not mean beeswax is its only ingredient. Candles, polishes, art materials, and cosmetic products can contain substances with different health effects.

Risk also depends on how the exposure occurred. Swallowing cool wax, inhaling smoke, getting liquid wax in the eye, and being burned by melted wax are different problems and may need different care.

- Swallowing a large amount or a solid piece
- Young age, because smaller objects can block a child's airway
- Difficulty chewing or swallowing
- Reduced alertness at the time of exposure
- Prior intestinal surgery, narrowing, or another condition that affects movement through the intestines
- Repeated eating of wax or other nonfood materials
- Sensitivity to propolis, fragrance, or another product ingredient

Diagnosis

There is no routine blood test that confirms beeswax poisoning. Assessment begins with the exposure history and the person's symptoms.

A clinician or poison specialist may ask for:

Keep the container or take a clear photograph of its label. Do not rely only on the product's color, smell, or marketing description.

A person who remains well after a small exposure to pure beeswax may not need medical testing. If choking, aspiration, or intestinal obstruction is suspected, clinicians may examine

breathing and the abdomen. Imaging such as an X-ray or CT scan may be considered, although wax itself may not always be easy to see. Tests are chosen based on symptoms and the suspected complication rather than the presence of beeswax alone.

Skin reactions are often diagnosed from their appearance and timing. If dermatitis keeps returning, a dermatologist or allergy specialist may use patch testing. This involves placing small amounts of possible allergens on the skin to look for a delayed reaction.

- The exact product name and ingredient list
- The amount that may have been swallowed
- When the exposure occurred
- The person's age and approximate weight
- Current symptoms
- Relevant allergies or digestive conditions

Treatment and management

For an ingestion, remove any remaining wax from the mouth. Do not make the person vomit. Vomiting can increase the risk that material will enter the airway.

Contact a poison center for advice if more than a small taste was swallowed, the amount is uncertain, the product contains other ingredients, or symptoms develop. In the United States, Poison Help is available at 1-800-222-1222. People outside the United States should contact their local poison information service. Have the product package available.

Do not give food, drink, or medicine to someone who is drowsy, actively vomiting, having a seizure, or having trouble swallowing. Do not use laxatives or other home remedies unless a healthcare professional recommends them.

Call emergency services immediately if the person:

Medical care is based on the problem present. A person with mild digestive symptoms may need observation and supportive care. If dehydration develops from vomiting, fluids may be given.

Suspected intestinal obstruction needs hospital assessment. Management can include temporarily avoiding food, intravenous fluids, treatment for nausea or pain, and removal of stomach contents through a tube when appropriate. An endoscopic procedure or surgery may be needed if material remains stuck or the intestine is damaged. These decisions depend on examination and imaging findings.

For a mild skin exposure, stop using the product and gently wash the area. Persistent or significant dermatitis may require clinician-guided skin treatment and help identifying the triggering ingredient.

A severe allergic reaction is treated as an emergency. A person who has been prescribed an epinephrine auto-injector should use it according to their emergency plan and then seek emergency care.

For melted-wax burns, place the area under cool running water. Do not use ice, and do not pull off wax that is firmly stuck to injured skin. Seek medical care for deep burns, extensive blistering, or burns involving the face, hands, genitals, major joints, or a large area.

- Is choking or cannot breathe normally
- Becomes difficult to wake
- Has a seizure or collapses
- Develops throat or tongue swelling
- Has signs of a severe allergic reaction

Complications

Complications from pure beeswax are unusual after a small accidental taste, but they can occur after larger or more complex exposures.

A piece of wax can block the airway or be inhaled into the lungs. Aspiration means material enters the airway instead of the esophagus, the tube leading to the stomach. This can cause coughing, breathing difficulty, or later lung inflammation.

A large mass of wax may obstruct the stomach or intestines. Untreated obstruction can lead to dehydration, reduced blood flow to the bowel, a tear in the intestinal wall, or infection. Severe complications are more likely to cause ongoing pain, repeated vomiting, abdominal swelling, and inability to pass stool or gas.

Allergic contact dermatitis may continue if the person keeps using the responsible product. Repeated exposure can lead to cracked, painful skin, especially on the lips or hands. Immediate allergic reactions can be serious but should not be assumed from mild localized irritation alone.

Burns from melted wax can blister, become infected, or leave scars. Toxic effects from solvents, essential oils, or other additives depend on the specific formulation and should be assessed separately.

Follow up

No special follow-up is usually needed when a small amount of pure beeswax was swallowed and the person remains completely well after poison-center guidance. Continue to watch for new digestive or breathing symptoms as advised.

Arrange routine follow-up with a healthcare professional if mild stomach symptoms do not settle, a rash continues after the product is stopped, or wax eating happens more than once. Repeated eating of nonfood substances may be a form of pica and deserves a nonjudgmental medical assessment for nutritional, developmental, or behavioral factors.

Seek urgent medical care for increasing abdominal pain, repeated vomiting, abdominal swelling, inability to pass stool or gas, persistent coughing after choking, or worsening burn symptoms.

Call emergency services for severe breathing difficulty, active choking, collapse, a seizure, marked drowsiness, or signs of a severe allergic reaction. These symptoms should not wait for a routine appointment.

Sources

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