CONDITION

Campho-phenique overdose

Learn how Campho-Phenique poisoning can happen, which symptoms need emergency care, and how healthcare professionals evaluate and treat an exposure.

WHAT IT IS
Poisoning from swallowed or absorbed Campho-Phenique

BODY SYSTEM
Nervous and digestive systems

MAIN SYMPTOMS
Confusion, shaking, seizures, vomiting

WHAT CAUSES IT
Swallowing or skin absorption

HOW IT IS DIAGNOSED
Exposure history, symptoms, clinical examination

MAIN TREATMENT
Supportive care and exposure decontamination

CAN IT BE CURED?
Sometimes - body clears chemicals with support

IS IT AN EMERGENCY?
Sometimes - seizure, breathing trouble, collapse, or severe confusion

LONG-TERM OUTLOOK
Usually good after minor exposure, with possible organ injury after severe poisoning

Overview

Campho-Phenique is a brand of over-the-counter medicine applied to the skin for problems such as cold sores, insect bites, and minor skin irritation. Common Campho-Phenique liquids contain camphor and phenol, but ingredients and strengths can vary by product. The package label should be checked whenever an exposure occurs.

An overdose, or poisoning, can happen when the medicine is swallowed or when too much is absorbed through the skin. Eye exposure can also cause injury. Camphor mainly affects the brain and nervous system. Phenol can irritate or burn tissue and may affect several organs after significant exposure.

Swallowing Campho-Phenique can be dangerous, particularly for a young child. Camphor is absorbed quickly, and serious nervous system symptoms may begin soon after an exposure. A

person can appear well at first and then develop confusion, shaking, or a seizure.

If Campho-Phenique has been swallowed, contact Poison Control immediately rather than waiting for symptoms. In the United States, call 1-800-222-1222 or use the Poison Control online tool. Outside the United States, contact the local poison center or emergency service.

Call emergency services now if the person:

Do not make the person vomit. Do not give food, drink, activated charcoal, or a home remedy unless a poison specialist or healthcare professional specifically recommends it.

- Has a seizure
- Has trouble breathing
- Collapses or cannot be awakened
- Has severe confusion or unusual behavior
- Develops blue, gray, or very pale lips or skin

Symptoms

Symptoms depend on the product, amount, route of exposure, and the person's age and health. Swallowing creates the greatest concern for whole-body poisoning, but heavy or repeated skin exposure may also cause problems.

Early digestive symptoms may include burning in the mouth or throat, nausea, vomiting, and abdominal pain. Phenol can damage tissue directly, so swallowing may cause painful irritation or chemical burns. However, phenol can also numb tissue, which means a serious exposure may not always be very painful.

Camphor's effects on the nervous system are especially important. Symptoms may include:

Seizures can begin suddenly. Vomiting during a seizure or while very sleepy can allow stomach contents to enter the lungs, a complication called aspiration.

Breathing may become slow, irregular, or difficult after a severe exposure. A rapid or abnormal heartbeat and low blood pressure are also possible in serious poisoning.

On the skin, Campho-Phenique may cause redness, irritation, whitening, numbness, blistering, or a chemical burn. Absorption is more likely when the product covers a large area, remains under a tight dressing, or is applied to broken or burned skin.

Eye exposure may cause burning, tearing, redness, blurred vision, or difficulty keeping the eye open. Persistent eye symptoms require prompt medical evaluation.

- Restlessness, agitation, or confusion
- Dizziness or poor coordination
- Muscle twitching or shaking
- Seizures
- Extreme sleepiness or loss of consciousness

Causes and risk factors

The most common cause of poisoning is accidental swallowing. Young children may drink a liquid product or lick it from their hands or skin. Because children have smaller bodies, even an amount that looks limited may be medically important.

Other exposures may result from misunderstanding the label or using the medicine in a way it was not designed to be used. Campho-Phenique is intended for external use. It should not be placed in the mouth, swallowed, or added to food or drinks.

Risk may be higher when the product is:

Heat and damaged skin may increase absorption. Intentional swallowing also requires immediate medical care, including support for the circumstances that led to the exposure.

The exact product matters. Campho-Phenique products may have different forms or ingredients, and other topical medicines can contain camphor. Keep the container or take a clear photograph of its label so poison specialists can identify the substance and strength.

- Applied over a large area of skin
- Used repeatedly or in greater amounts than the label directs
- Applied to open wounds, severe burns, or badly damaged skin
- Covered with an airtight or tight bandage
- Transferred into an unlabeled cup or bottle
- Stored where a child can see or reach it
- Used together with other products containing camphor or phenol

Diagnosis

Healthcare professionals diagnose Campho-Phenique poisoning mainly from the exposure history and the person's symptoms. There is no single routine test that confirms every case.

A poison specialist or clinician will ask about the product name, active ingredients, amount involved, time of exposure, and whether it was swallowed, inhaled, placed in an eye, or applied to the skin. They may also ask about the person's age, weight, health conditions, current medicines, and symptoms.

If possible, bring the original container to the emergency department. Do not delay emergency care while searching for it.

The medical examination may include checking alertness, breathing, heart rate, blood pressure, temperature, and oxygen level. Clinicians will look for mouth, eye, or skin burns and for signs of abnormal movement or seizure activity.

Testing depends on the severity of the exposure. It may include:

Camphor and phenol blood levels are not commonly available and usually do not guide immediate treatment. Treatment should not be delayed while waiting for specialized testing.

- An electrocardiogram, or ECG, to check heart rhythm
- Blood glucose and electrolyte tests
- Tests of kidney and liver function
- Blood tests that assess oxygen, acid balance, or other effects of poisoning
- Chest imaging when aspiration or another lung problem is suspected

Treatment and management

Immediate advice from Poison Control is important because camphor can cause symptoms quickly. The safest next step depends on the product, route, amount, age of the person, and current symptoms.

After swallowing, do not induce vomiting. Vomiting increases the chance that the chemical will enter the lungs. Activated charcoal and other stomach-emptying treatments are not routine home care. A medical toxicologist may consider specific procedures in selected circumstances, but camphor's rapid absorption and the risk of aspiration affect these decisions.

For skin exposure, remove contaminated clothing and wash exposed skin promptly with soap and plenty of water. Avoid hard scrubbing, which may worsen tissue injury. Contact Poison Control for guidance if a large area was involved, the skin is damaged, or symptoms develop.

For an eye exposure, remove contact lenses if they come out easily and rinse the eye with clean, lukewarm running water. Begin rinsing right away and contact Poison Control for

instructions. Ongoing pain, blurred vision, marked redness, or difficulty opening the eye needs urgent evaluation.

There is no specific antidote that reverses camphor poisoning. Hospital treatment is supportive, meaning clinicians protect breathing and circulation while the body clears the chemicals.

Treatment may include oxygen, intravenous fluids, heart monitoring, and repeated neurologic examinations. Medicines can be given to stop seizures or severe agitation. A breathing tube and ventilator may be needed if the person cannot protect the airway or breathe adequately.

Chemical burns are cleaned and assessed according to their location and depth. Eye injuries may require examination by an ophthalmologist, a doctor who specializes in eye care. People with significant symptoms may be observed in an emergency department or admitted to a hospital.

Complications

Many limited skin exposures cause only local irritation, but swallowing or substantial absorption can lead to serious complications.

Seizures are a major concern with camphor. A prolonged seizure can interfere with breathing and reduce oxygen delivery to the brain and other organs. Repeated seizures may require intensive monitoring and treatment.

Vomiting, reduced alertness, or seizures can cause aspiration. This may lead to airway blockage, chemical irritation of the lungs, or aspiration pneumonia.

Phenol can produce chemical burns of the skin, eyes, mouth, throat, and digestive tract. Deeper injuries may heal slowly and can occasionally leave scarring. Eye burns can affect vision.

Severe poisoning may cause abnormal heart rhythms, low blood pressure, breathing failure, or injury to the kidneys or liver. The likelihood of these complications depends on the amount absorbed and how quickly effective care begins.

Emotional or behavioral care is also important after an intentional exposure. The healthcare team can address immediate safety and arrange mental health support.

Follow up

Follow the discharge instructions from the emergency department or poison center. These

instructions are based on the exact exposure and take priority over general information.

Return for emergency care if a seizure, breathing problem, collapse, severe confusion, or inability to wake develops. New neurologic symptoms after leaving care also require immediate reassessment.

Seek prompt medical advice for persistent vomiting, worsening abdominal pain, increasing sleepiness, or signs of dehydration. Skin that becomes more painful, swollen, blistered, discolored, or drains fluid should be examined. Eye pain, light sensitivity, or blurred vision after rinsing also needs urgent care.

Routine follow-up may be recommended to check the healing of a skin, mouth, or eye injury. A clinician may repeat kidney, liver, or other tests after a substantial exposure. Most people do not need long-term testing after a minor exposure if a poison specialist has determined that home observation is appropriate and no symptoms develop.

To reduce the chance of another exposure, keep Campho-Phenique in its original child-resistant container. Store it locked, out of sight and reach of children, and separate from food, drinks, and oral medicines. Dispose of outdated products according to local medication-disposal guidance.

Sources

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