CONDITION

Eucalyptus oil overdose

Eucalyptus oil overdose is poisoning caused by swallowing or otherwise absorbing too much concentrated eucalyptus oil.

WHAT IT IS
Toxic illness from too much concentrated eucalyptus oil

BODY SYSTEM
Nervous system, lungs, and digestive system

MAIN SYMPTOMS
Vomiting, drowsiness, breathing problems, seizures

WHAT CAUSES IT
Excess exposure to concentrated eucalyptus oil

HOW IT IS DIAGNOSED
Exposure history and clinical assessment; no routine confirmatory test

MAIN TREATMENT
Poison-centre guidance and supportive hospital care

CAN IT BE CURED?
Yes, most recover as the oil clears

IS IT AN EMERGENCY?
Yes, after swallowing or with drowsiness, seizures, or breathing trouble

LONG-TERM OUTLOOK
Usually full recovery; severe oxygen loss may cause lasting harm

Overview

Eucalyptus oil overdose is poisoning from exposure to too much concentrated eucalyptus essential oil. It most often happens when the oil is swallowed. Less commonly, significant exposure may occur through the lungs, eyes, or skin.

Eucalyptus oil contains chemicals such as eucalyptol, also called 1,8-cineole. These can affect the brain, breathing, and digestive system. Essential oils are highly concentrated, so a product being described as "natural" does not mean it is safe to swallow.

Children are at particular risk because even a small mouthful may be important for their size. Poisoning can also affect adults after a dosing mistake, use of a homemade remedy, or intentional swallowing.

Symptoms may begin quickly. Anyone who may have swallowed eucalyptus oil should receive immediate advice from a poison centre or emergency medical service, even if they currently feel well. Do not wait for symptoms to appear.

Symptoms

Symptoms often begin within about 30 minutes, although they can take several hours to develop. Their severity cannot be judged reliably from the taste, smell, or estimated amount alone.

Early symptoms may include:

More serious poisoning can cause confusion, difficulty staying awake, slowed or difficult breathing, seizures, or loss of consciousness. A person may initially seem well and then become drowsy.

Vomiting creates an additional risk. Eucalyptus oil can enter the lungs during vomiting, known as aspiration. This may cause coughing, choking, chest discomfort, wheezing, or shortness of breath. Lung symptoms can sometimes develop after the initial exposure.

Oil in the eyes may cause pain, redness, and watering. Skin exposure is more likely to cause irritation than whole-body poisoning, but medical advice is still appropriate if a large area was exposed or symptoms develop.

- Burning or irritation in the mouth
- Nausea, vomiting, or stomach pain
- Dizziness, headache, or poor coordination
- Unusual tiredness or drowsiness

Causes and risk factors

Overdose usually follows swallowing undiluted eucalyptus oil or a product containing it. Products can differ greatly in concentration. The amount in a diffuser liquid, chest rub, mouth product, or blended essential oil may not be clear from the product name alone.

Common situations include accidental swallowing by a child, confusing the bottle with medicine, using an unsuitable homemade remedy, or taking more than the product label directs. Storing the oil in a cup, drink bottle, or unlabelled container makes mistakes more likely.

Risk may be higher when the person is very young, has difficulty swallowing, or is already sleepy. These factors increase the chance that oil or vomit will enter the lungs.

Intentional swallowing can cause severe poisoning and may also signal an immediate mental health crisis. It requires urgent medical assessment regardless of the amount reported.

Normal use of a diffuser is less likely to cause severe poisoning than swallowing concentrated oil. However, vapour may irritate the eyes or airways, especially in a poorly ventilated space or in someone with sensitive lungs.

Diagnosis

There is no routine blood test that directly confirms eucalyptus oil poisoning. Diagnosis is usually based on what happened, the product involved, the time of exposure, and the symptoms.

Take the bottle, packaging, or a photograph of the label if it is safe to do so. The exact product name, ingredients, concentration, and approximate time of exposure can help a poison specialist assess the risk. Do not delay emergency care while searching for this information.

Medical staff may check alertness, breathing, heart rate, blood pressure, temperature, and blood oxygen level. Blood tests may be used to look for problems such as abnormal blood sugar, changes in body salts, or effects from another substance.

An electrocardiogram may be used to check the heart in a significant poisoning. A chest X-ray is not always needed, but it may be considered if there is coughing, low oxygen, difficult breathing, or concern that oil entered the lungs.

Treatment and management

There is no specific antidote for eucalyptus oil. Treatment supports breathing, circulation, and brain function while the body clears the oil.

If someone has swallowed it, do not make them vomit. Do not give activated charcoal, food, milk, or another home remedy unless a poison specialist specifically advises it. Vomiting or giving substances by mouth may increase the risk of oil entering the lungs.

Call your local poison centre promptly. They can assess the product and exposure and tell you whether emergency evaluation is needed. If the person is drowsy, having a seizure, struggling to breathe, or unconscious, call emergency services instead. Place an unconscious but breathing person on their side if you can do so safely, and do not give anything by mouth.

For skin exposure, remove contaminated clothing and wash the skin with soap and water. For eye exposure, rinse the open eye gently with clean lukewarm water and seek poison-centre advice. Move to fresh air after troublesome vapour exposure.

Hospital care may include close observation, oxygen, fluids through a vein, and treatment for nausea. Medicines may be given to stop seizures. A breathing tube and ventilator may be needed if the person cannot protect their airway or breathe adequately.

Stomach pumping and activated charcoal are not routinely used because eucalyptus oil is absorbed quickly and can be dangerous if aspirated. The healthcare team will decide how long observation is needed based on symptoms, the product, and the circumstances.

Complications

The most important complications involve the brain and lungs. Severe drowsiness can interfere with normal breathing and make it easier to inhale vomit.

Aspiration may cause chemical pneumonitis, which is inflammation of the lungs caused by the oil rather than an infection. This can lead to low oxygen levels and, in severe cases, respiratory failure.

Prolonged seizures or severe breathing problems can reduce oxygen reaching the brain. Lasting neurological injury is possible after severe oxygen loss, although many people recover without permanent effects.

Falls, choking, or other injuries may occur if poisoning causes confusion or loss of consciousness. Repeated vomiting can also lead to dehydration.

Prevention

Most eucalyptus oil overdoses can be prevented. Keep essential oils in their original, clearly labelled containers. Store them locked away and out of the sight and reach of children. Child-resistant caps reduce risk but are not childproof.

Do not transfer eucalyptus oil into a cup, food container, or drink bottle. Clean spills promptly and replace the cap immediately after use.

Do not swallow eucalyptus essential oil or use it in a homemade oral remedy. Products containing eucalyptus are not interchangeable: a tea made from leaves, a chest rub, a diffuser liquid, and concentrated essential oil have different ingredients and strengths.

Follow the product label for its intended use. Avoid adding extra oil because the scent seems

weak. Keep diffuser liquids and used containers away from children, since they may still contain concentrated oil.

If someone in the household may intentionally swallow a harmful substance, secure essential oils alongside medicines and household chemicals. Support from a mental health professional may also help reduce future risk.

Living with it and what to expect

Eucalyptus oil overdose is usually a single, short-term event rather than an ongoing illness. People with mild symptoms may improve as the oil is cleared over several hours. A period of medical observation may still be needed because drowsiness and breathing problems can develop after the exposure.

Many people recover fully with prompt assessment and supportive care. Recovery may take longer if oil entered the lungs, seizures occurred, or mechanical breathing support was required. Lung inflammation can cause cough, tiredness, or shortness of breath for days or longer.

Routine follow-up is usually focused on any remaining symptoms or abnormal test results. Seek follow-up care if coughing, breathing difficulty, unusual tiredness, confusion, weakness, or balance problems continue after discharge.

After an accidental exposure, reviewing how the product was stored can help prevent another event. If the overdose was intentional, ongoing mental health care is an important part of recovery and safety planning.

When to get medical help

Contact a poison centre immediately after any suspected swallowing of eucalyptus oil. This applies even when there are no symptoms or the amount seems small. A poison specialist can judge the risk using the product, concentration, age, symptoms, and time since exposure.

Call emergency services now if the person has:

Do not let a drowsy or confused person drive. Bring the product container to the hospital if it can be collected safely.

For skin or eye exposure, obtain poison-centre advice and rinse the affected area. Arrange routine medical review if redness, pain, coughing, or other irritation does not settle. Breathing difficulty, marked drowsiness, or worsening symptoms require urgent help rather than routine

follow-up.

- Trouble breathing, choking, or blue or grey lips
- A seizure, collapse, or loss of consciousness
- Severe confusion or difficulty being awakened
- Repeated vomiting with coughing or breathing problems
- Swallowed the oil intentionally

Common questions

Can a small amount of eucalyptus oil be dangerous?

Yes, especially for a young child. Concentrations differ between products, and it is difficult to estimate how much was swallowed. Contact a poison centre rather than using a home estimate to decide whether the exposure is safe.

What if eucalyptus oil was swallowed but there are no symptoms?

Get poison-centre advice immediately. Symptoms may be delayed for several hours, and a person can become drowsy after initially appearing well. Do not wait for vomiting or sleepiness before calling.

Should I make the person vomit?

No. Vomiting increases the chance that oil will enter the lungs. Do not give salt water, milk, charcoal, or another remedy unless a poison specialist tells you to do so.

Can a eucalyptus diffuser cause an overdose?

Severe poisoning is more commonly linked to swallowing the liquid. Diffuser vapour can still irritate the eyes and airways, particularly in enclosed rooms. Move to fresh air and seek advice if it causes breathing problems, dizziness, vomiting, or unusual drowsiness.

Is eucalyptus tea the same as eucalyptus oil?

No. Essential oil is far more concentrated than a drink made from leaves. Products vary, and concentrated oil should not be substituted for tea or swallowed as a home treatment.

Can eucalyptus oil poisoning cause permanent damage?

Most people recover, but a severe overdose can cause aspiration, prolonged seizures, or dangerously low oxygen. These complications may lead to lasting lung or brain problems. Prompt emergency care reduces the chance of serious harm.

Sources

- Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne. Clinical Practice Guidelines: Eucalyptus Oil Poisoning
- MedlinePlus Medical Encyclopedia. Eucalyptus oil overdose
- Australian Therapeutic Goods Administration. Essential oils: Health warning
- National Capital Poison Center. Essential oils: Poisonous when misused
- Webb NJ, Pitt WR. Eucalyptus oil poisoning in childhood: 41 cases in south-east Queensland. Journal of Paediatrics and Child Health . 1993;29(5):368-371. doi:10.1111/j.1440-1754.1993.tb00535.x