CONDITION

Hydroxyzine overdose

Hydroxyzine overdose happens when someone takes enough hydroxyzine to cause harmful sleepiness, heart rhythm changes, or other toxic effects.

WHAT IT IS
Toxic effects from taking too much hydroxyzine

BODY SYSTEM
Nervous system, heart and circulation, and breathing

MAIN SYMPTOMS
Severe drowsiness, confusion, vomiting, abnormal heartbeat

WHAT CAUSES IT
Taking too much, accidentally or intentionally

HOW IT IS DIAGNOSED
Exposure history, examination, and electrocardiogram

MAIN TREATMENT
Supportive care and heart monitoring

CAN IT BE CURED?
Yes - effects usually resolve as hydroxyzine clears

IS IT AN EMERGENCY?
Yes - suspected overdose needs immediate poison advice

LONG-TERM OUTLOOK
Full recovery common after uncomplicated, promptly treated overdose

Overview

Hydroxyzine is a prescription antihistamine like cetirizine or loratadine . It blocks histamine, a chemical involved in allergic reactions. It is used for itching and sometimes for anxiety or short-term sedation.

Hydroxyzine can cause sleepiness even when taken as directed. An overdose means enough has been taken to produce harmful effects. This may happen after an accidental extra dose, a child swallowing the medicine, a medication mix-up, or an intentional ingestion.

The main effect is often marked drowsiness. Larger amounts can affect breathing, alertness, and the heart's electrical rhythm. Alcohol, opioids like oxycodone or morphine , sleeping pills, and other sedating medicines can make an overdose more dangerous.

There is no single amount that can be considered an overdose for everyone. Risk is affected by age, body size, health conditions, the amount taken, and any other substances involved. If more hydroxyzine was taken than prescribed, contact a poison centre immediately rather than waiting for symptoms.

In the United States, call Poison Help at 1-800-222-1222 . Outside the United States, use your local poison information service. Call emergency services immediately if the person is unconscious, cannot be awakened, has a seizure, collapses, or has trouble breathing.

Symptoms

Symptoms may begin with effects that resemble strong side effects of hydroxyzine. They can become more serious as the medicine is absorbed.

Possible symptoms include:

A person who appears to be sleeping may actually have a dangerously reduced level of consciousness. Do not assume that they can safely "sleep it off."

More serious poisoning may cause:

Hydroxyzine can lengthen part of the heart's electrical cycle, called the QT interval . In some circumstances, this may lead to a dangerous rhythm called torsades de pointes . A person cannot reliably identify this rhythm without an electrocardiogram.

Symptoms alone cannot show how much was taken or predict whether the poisoning will worsen. Someone may initially seem well after an ingestion.

- Unusual or severe sleepiness
- Dizziness or poor coordination
- Confusion, restlessness, or agitation
- Dry mouth and blurred vision
- Dilated, or enlarged, pupils
- Nausea or vomiting
- Fast or pounding heartbeat
- Inability to wake or respond normally
- Slow, shallow, or difficult breathing
- Seizures

- Fainting or collapse
- A very fast or irregular heartbeat
- Severe confusion or hallucinations

Causes and risk factors

Hydroxyzine overdose is caused by taking more medicine than the body can safely process. Common situations include taking a second dose by mistake, confusing hydroxyzine with another medicine, or a child reaching an unsecured container.

An overdose may also be intentional during a mental health crisis. This requires both medical care for the poisoning and compassionate assessment of the person's immediate safety.

Serious effects are more likely when hydroxyzine is taken with substances that cause drowsiness or slow breathing. These include alcohol, opioids, benzodiazepines like diazepam or lorazepam , sleeping medicines, and some other antihistamines.

The risk of heart rhythm problems may be higher in people who have:

Older adults may clear hydroxyzine more slowly and may be more sensitive to confusion, falls, and sedation. Children can also develop important effects after an unintended ingestion. These factors do not allow you to judge an overdose at home; a poison specialist needs the details of the exposure.

- A known long-QT condition or another heart rhythm disorder
- Significant heart disease or a very slow heartbeat
- Low potassium or magnesium levels
- Medicines that also prolong the QT interval
- A previous unexplained fainting episode linked to heart rhythm problems

Diagnosis

Hydroxyzine overdose is usually identified from the circumstances, symptoms, physical examination, and heart monitoring. There is no routinely used blood test that quickly confirms a hydroxyzine overdose.

If possible, take the medicine container or a clear photograph of its label to the hospital. Useful information includes the product name, tablet strength, approximate number missing, possible time of ingestion, and any other medicines or substances involved. Do not delay calling for help

while trying to collect these details.

An electrocardiogram , or ECG, records the heart's electrical activity. It can detect QT prolongation and other rhythm or conduction problems. Clinicians may repeat the ECG if symptoms continue or the first tracing is abnormal.

Blood tests may be used to check electrolytes such as potassium and magnesium, kidney or liver function, blood sugar, and possible co-ingestions. Additional testing is guided by the situation rather than by hydroxyzine exposure alone.

Treatment and management

There is no specific antidote that reverses hydroxyzine. Treatment supports breathing, circulation, and heart function while the body clears the medicine.

Hospital care may include:

Activated charcoal can bind some medicine in the digestive tract. Clinicians may consider it after certain recent ingestions, but only when it can be given safely. It can enter the lungs if a person is very drowsy or vomiting. Never give activated charcoal or any other home remedy unless a poison specialist specifically tells you to do so.

Do not make the person vomit. Do not give food, alcohol, caffeine, or another medicine in an attempt to counteract the hydroxyzine.

The required observation period is based on symptoms, ECG findings, the amount and timing involved, and possible co-ingestions. Someone with ongoing sleepiness, seizures, breathing problems, or an abnormal ECG may need longer monitoring or hospital admission.

If the overdose was intentional, care should also address the distress that led to it. This may include a mental health assessment and a plan to reduce the risk of another overdose.

- Monitoring of breathing, oxygen level, blood pressure, and heart rhythm
- Oxygen or airway support when breathing is affected
- Intravenous fluids when needed
- Medicines to control seizures or treat a dangerous heart rhythm
- Correction of abnormal potassium, magnesium, or other electrolytes

Complications

Most uncomplicated overdoses resolve with timely supportive care, but complications are

possible.

Severe drowsiness can reduce protective coughing and swallowing. Vomit may then enter the lungs, causing aspiration and breathing problems. Reduced alertness can also lead to falls or other injuries.

Breathing may become inadequate, especially when hydroxyzine has been combined with alcohol, opioids, or other sedatives. A prolonged lack of oxygen can injure the brain or other organs.

Seizures can cause injury and may interfere with breathing. Heart complications include QT prolongation, abnormal rhythms, fainting, and, rarely, cardiac arrest.

Lasting harm is not expected after an uncomplicated overdose that resolves without oxygen deprivation, major heart rhythm problems, or injury. When long-term problems occur, they are usually related to one of these complications rather than hydroxyzine remaining in the body.

Prevention

Hydroxyzine overdose is often preventable. Take it only as written on the prescription label, and do not take an extra dose to make up for one you may have missed. If you are unsure whether you already took a dose, ask a pharmacist or poison centre what to do.

Keep hydroxyzine in its original, labelled container. Store it locked and out of sight and reach of children. Child-resistant caps reduce risk but are not completely childproof.

A pill organizer can help prevent duplicate doses, but keep the organizer secured as carefully as the original container. Written schedules or medication reminders may help when several medicines are taken at different times.

Check with a pharmacist before combining hydroxyzine with alcohol, sleep aids, sedating cold remedies, or other antihistamines. Make sure each clinician involved in your care knows all the prescription medicines, non-prescription products, and supplements you use.

If someone in the household is at risk of self-harm, secure medicines and limit the amount that is readily accessible. A healthcare or mental health professional can help create a safer storage plan.

Living with it and what to expect

Hydroxyzine overdose is an acute poisoning, not usually a long-term condition. Symptoms improve as the medicine is cleared, although significant sleepiness and slowed thinking can

continue after the person first appears better. The course may be longer in older adults, after a large ingestion, or when other substances were taken.

Many people recover fully after observation and supportive treatment. Before discharge, the care team may want alertness, breathing, vital signs, and the ECG to remain stable.

After discharge, follow the instructions provided by the treating service. Avoid driving, operating machinery, drinking alcohol, or taking additional sedating substances until it is considered safe. Routine follow-up may be advised if there were abnormal ECG findings, injuries, complications, or uncertainty about the usual medication plan.

An accidental extra dose does not mean hydroxyzine can never be used again. A prescriber or pharmacist can review whether it remains appropriate and help prevent another dosing error. Do not restart it after an overdose until the treating service says when it is safe.

After an intentional overdose, recovery includes more than the medicine leaving the body. Mental health follow-up, support from trusted people, and safer medication storage can help address continuing risk. Another overdose, new suicidal thoughts, or concern that the person cannot remain safe requires urgent help rather than waiting for a routine appointment.

When to get medical help

Get immediate poison advice for any suspected hydroxyzine overdose , even if there are no symptoms yet. In the United States, call Poison Help at 1-800-222-1222 . Do not wait for a routine appointment or for symptoms to develop.

Call emergency services now if the person:

If the ingestion was intentional, do not leave the person alone while help is being arranged. Remove remaining medicines only if this can be done safely. An overdose is a medical emergency even if the person later says they feel fine.

Routine follow-up is appropriate after emergency assessment when the treating service recommends review of medication safety, ECG findings, injuries, or mental health needs. Worsening drowsiness, fainting, breathing trouble, seizures, or palpitations are not routine follow-up concerns; they need urgent reassessment.

- Cannot be awakened or is responding abnormally
- Has slow, shallow, or difficult breathing
- Has a seizure
- Faints, collapses, or cannot stand safely

- Has a very fast or irregular heartbeat
- Took hydroxyzine in an intentional self-harm attempt

Common questions

How much hydroxyzine is an overdose?

There is no single toxic dose that applies to everyone. Risk is influenced by the person's age, size, medical history, tablet strength, amount taken, and other substances involved. If someone took more than prescribed or the amount is uncertain, call a poison centre immediately.

Can a hydroxyzine overdose kill you?

It can be life-threatening, particularly if it causes breathing failure, seizures, or a dangerous heart rhythm. Combining it with alcohol, opioids, or other sedatives can increase the risk. Prompt assessment and supportive treatment improve the chance of full recovery.

Can I sleep off too much hydroxyzine?

No. Severe poisoning can look like ordinary sleepiness, and the person may become harder to wake as the medicine is absorbed. Contact a poison centre after any suspected overdose. Call emergency services if the person is difficult to wake or has abnormal breathing.

How long does a hydroxyzine overdose last?

The duration is not the same for everyone. Effects can continue for many hours and may last longer after a large ingestion, in older adults, or when the liver or kidneys clear medicines slowly. Co-ingested substances can also prolong symptoms. Medical monitoring should guide when it is safe to leave care.

What happens if hydroxyzine is mixed with alcohol?

Both can cause drowsiness, impaired coordination, and reduced alertness. Together they can increase the risk of vomiting, aspiration, injury, and breathing problems. If more than the intended amount may have been taken, seek poison advice rather than waiting for symptoms.

Can hydroxyzine overdose cause permanent damage?

Most people who recover without a major complication are not expected to have permanent effects. Lasting injury is possible if severe poisoning causes prolonged oxygen deprivation, cardiac arrest, major trauma, or another complication.

Sources

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- MedlinePlus Medical Encyclopedia: Hydroxyzine overdose , US National Library of Medicine
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- Schlit AF, Delaunois A, Colomar A, et al. Risk of QT prolongation and torsade de pointes associated with exposure to hydroxyzine: re-evaluation of an established drug , Pharmacology Research & Perspectives , 2017;5(3):e00309