CONDITION

Lanolin poisoning

Lanolin poisoning is illness caused by swallowing lanolin or a product containing it.

WHAT IT IS
Illness after harmful lanolin exposure

BODY SYSTEM
Digestive system and skin

MAIN SYMPTOMS
Nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, skin redness

WHAT CAUSES IT
Swallowing lanolin or reacting to skin contact

HOW IT IS DIAGNOSED
Exposure history and clinical assessment

MAIN TREATMENT
First aid, observation, and symptom relief

CAN IT BE CURED?
Yes - most acute effects fully resolve

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

LONG-TERM OUTLOOK
Most people recover without lasting effects

Overview

Lanolin is a waxy substance taken from sheep's wool. It is used to soften and protect skin. Pure or highly purified lanolin may be found in nipple creams, lip products, moisturizers, ointments, cosmetics, and some medicines applied to the skin.

Lanolin poisoning refers to illness after someone swallows enough lanolin, or a lanolin-containing product, to cause symptoms. Pure lanolin has low toxicity. A small accidental taste is unlikely to cause serious poisoning, although it may upset the stomach.

The exact product matters. A cream, cosmetic, or medicine may contain ingredients other than lanolin. Those ingredients can create different risks, even when the amount of lanolin is small. Keep the container or take a clear photograph of its label if you seek advice.

Skin reactions are more often due to irritation or contact allergy than poisoning. Contact

allergy means the immune system reacts after lanolin touches the skin, usually causing an itchy eczema-like rash. This is different from becoming ill after swallowing it.

Symptoms

Swallowing lanolin may irritate the digestive system. Possible symptoms include:

A lanolin skin reaction usually affects the area where the product was applied. The skin may become itchy, red, swollen, cracked, or blistered. On darker skin, redness may be less noticeable, but the area may look darker, purple, grey, or ashen.

Lanolin in the eye can cause watering, burning, redness, or blurred vision from irritation.

Trouble breathing, swelling of the tongue or throat, collapse, seizures, or difficulty waking are not expected after a simple small exposure. These symptoms need emergency care because they may indicate choking, a severe allergic reaction, or poisoning from another ingredient.

- Nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, or stomach discomfort
- An oily feeling or unpleasant taste in the mouth
- Coughing or choking while swallowing
- Redness or irritation around the mouth

Causes and risk factors

The main cause is swallowing lanolin or a product that contains it. This can happen when a child explores a container, when a cosmetic is mistaken for food, or when a person accidentally uses a product incorrectly.

How much risk an exposure creates is affected by:

Intentional ingestion requires prompt medical assessment, regardless of the estimated amount.

Lanolin contact allergy is more likely in people whose skin barrier is already damaged. This includes some people with eczema, long-lasting leg ulcers, or ongoing inflammation around the genital or anal area. However, most people who use lanolin do not develop an allergy.

A previous rash from lanolin or "wool alcohols" raises the chance of another reaction. Wool alcohols are components of lanolin that can trigger contact allergy. Lanolin may also appear on labels as wool fat or adeps lanae .

- The exact product and its other ingredients
- The amount swallowed
- The person's age, body size, and existing health conditions
- Whether coughing or choking occurred
- Whether symptoms are developing

Diagnosis

There is no blood test that specifically confirms lanolin poisoning. Diagnosis is usually based on the exposure history, the product label, and the symptoms.

A poison information specialist or clinician may ask:

A physical examination may include checks of breathing, heart rate, blood pressure, hydration, alertness, skin, mouth, and eyes.

Laboratory tests are not normally needed after a small exposure to pure lanolin when there are no symptoms. Blood tests, monitoring, or imaging may be used if symptoms are significant, the amount is uncertain, or the product contains other potentially harmful substances.

If repeated skin reactions suggest contact allergy, a dermatologist may offer patch testing. Small amounts of possible allergens are placed on the skin under controlled conditions and checked over several days. Patch testing diagnoses delayed contact allergy; it does not test for swallowed lanolin poisoning.

- What product was involved
- When the exposure happened
- How much may have been swallowed
- Whether the person coughed, choked, vomited, or developed a rash
- What first aid has already been given

Treatment and management

After someone swallows lanolin, remove any product left in the mouth and gently wipe or rinse the mouth. Do not make the person vomit. Vomiting can increase the risk of choking or drawing material into the lungs.

Contact a poison information service for advice based on the exact product and amount. In the

United States, Poison Control can be reached at 1-800-222-1222 or through its online tool. Elsewhere, use your local poison centre or urgent medical service.

If lanolin gets on the skin, remove contaminated clothing and wash the area with mild soap and water. Stop using the product if a rash develops. If it gets in the eye, remove contact lenses when easy to do and rinse the eye continuously with clean, lukewarm water.

Medical treatment is supportive, meaning it manages symptoms while the body recovers. It may include observation, fluids, treatment for nausea, or care for irritated skin or eyes. If another ingredient is responsible, treatment will be based on that substance.

Lanolin contact allergy is managed by avoiding lanolin-containing products. A clinician may recommend treatment to calm the inflamed skin. Product labels need to be checked because lanolin and its derivatives can appear in cosmetics, skin treatments, and medicated ointments.

Complications

Serious complications from pure lanolin are uncommon. Repeated vomiting or diarrhea can cause dehydration, especially in young children, older adults, and people who are already unwell.

Coughing or choking during swallowing raises concern that some material entered the airway. This is called aspiration. Ongoing coughing, wheezing, chest discomfort, or breathing difficulty after an exposure needs medical assessment.

A severe or untreated skin reaction can lead to cracking, pain, and sleep disturbance. Broken skin can sometimes develop a bacterial infection. Warning signs include worsening pain, warmth, pus, or redness that continues to spread.

The greatest uncertainty often comes from other ingredients. A lanolin-containing medicine, cleaner, or cosmetic should not be assumed safe to swallow simply because lanolin itself has low toxicity.

Prevention

Accidental lanolin poisoning can usually be prevented. Store creams, cosmetics, and medicines in their original containers, with the cap closed, and out of children's sight and reach. Do not transfer them into food or drink containers.

Read the label before applying or giving any product. Dispose of damaged or unlabelled containers safely. When using nipple cream, follow the product instructions and remove any

excess if the label says to do so.

Lanolin allergy cannot always be prevented before the first reaction. If patch testing has confirmed an allergy, avoiding lanolin, wool alcohols, and related ingredients can prevent many repeat flare-ups. Do not test a suspected product by deliberately applying it to already inflamed skin.

Living with it and what to expect

Lanolin poisoning is usually a short-term event rather than a long-lasting condition. Mild stomach symptoms from a small exposure often settle with observation and basic supportive care. The timing depends on the amount, the product's other ingredients, and whether vomiting or diarrhea continues.

A single uncomplicated exposure is not expected to cause lanolin to build up in the body or create chronic poisoning. Once symptoms have resolved, most people do not need ongoing medical follow-up.

Contact dermatitis can last longer than stomach upset. A rash may take days or weeks to settle after exposure stops, especially if the skin was already damaged. It can return whenever a product containing the problem ingredient is used again.

People with confirmed lanolin allergy can usually continue normal activities by checking labels and choosing lanolin-free products. A pharmacist or dermatologist can help identify suitable alternatives if lanolin is present in a necessary skin treatment.

When to get medical help

Call emergency services now if the person:

Contact a poison centre or urgent medical service promptly if a child swallowed the product, the amount is large or unknown, the ingestion was intentional, or the product contains medicines or other chemicals.

Prompt assessment is also appropriate for repeated vomiting, severe stomach pain, blood in vomit or stool, ongoing coughing after swallowing, marked drowsiness, eye pain, or persistent changes in vision.

Arrange routine medical follow-up if a rash does not improve after the product is stopped, keeps returning with different products, spreads beyond the contact area, or shows possible infection. Recurrent reactions may need patch testing for lanolin contact allergy.

- Has trouble breathing or severe, continuing choking
- Has swelling of the tongue, mouth, or throat
- Collapses, has a seizure, or is difficult to wake
- Develops blue, grey, or unusually pale lips or skin

Common questions

Is lanolin poisonous if swallowed?

Pure lanolin has low toxicity. A small accidental taste is unlikely to cause serious harm, but a larger amount may cause nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea. Products containing lanolin may have other ingredients with different risks, so check the label and contact a poison information service.

What if my baby swallowed lanolin nipple cream?

Wipe away any cream left in the mouth and do not cause vomiting. A small amount of a product made mainly from highly purified lanolin is generally low risk. However, use the product name, ingredient list, estimated amount, and your baby's symptoms when asking a poison centre for advice.

Can lanolin poison me through my skin?

Normal use on the skin is not expected to cause systemic poisoning. The more likely problem is local irritation or contact allergy. Stop using the product and seek routine medical advice if an itchy, swollen, cracked, or blistering rash develops.

Should I make myself vomit after swallowing lanolin?

No. Making yourself vomit can cause choking or allow material to enter the lungs. Remove what remains in the mouth and contact a poison information service for product-specific advice.

How long do symptoms last?

Mild digestive symptoms are usually short-lived, but there is no fixed timetable. Symptoms may last longer after a larger exposure or when other ingredients are involved. A contact allergy rash may continue for days or weeks and can return with another exposure.

Is a lanolin allergy the same as lanolin poisoning?

No. Poisoning describes harmful effects after an exposure, usually swallowing a product. Lanolin allergy is an immune reaction in the skin after contact and usually causes eczema-like inflammation. The two problems are assessed and managed differently.

Sources

- MedlinePlus Medical Encyclopedia: Lanolin poisoning . U.S. National Library of Medicine
- Poison Control: Online and telephone poison help . National Capital Poison Center
- DermNet: Contact reactions to lanolin . DermNet New Zealand
- NHS: Poisoning . National Health Service
- Electronic Code of Federal Regulations, Title 21, Part 347: Skin protectant drug products . U.S. Food and Drug Administration