CONDITION

Shampoo - swallowing

Shampoo swallowing is an exposure that usually causes mild stomach upset but can be more serious if shampoo enters the lungs.

WHAT IT IS
Accidental or intentional swallowing of shampoo

BODY SYSTEM
Digestive system and lungs

MAIN SYMPTOMS
Nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, coughing

WHAT CAUSES IT
Shampoo entering the mouth and being swallowed

HOW IT IS DIAGNOSED
Exposure history, product label, and symptom assessment

MAIN TREATMENT
Poison advice, observation, and supportive care

CAN IT BE CURED?
Yes - most effects resolve quickly

IS IT AN EMERGENCY?
Sometimes - breathing trouble makes it urgent

LONG-TERM OUTLOOK
Most people recover without lasting effects

Overview

Shampoo contains cleansing chemicals called surfactants. These chemicals help water mix with oil and dirt so they can be rinsed away. When swallowed, they may irritate the mouth, throat, stomach, and intestines.

A small accidental taste or mouthful of ordinary shampoo usually causes no symptoms or only mild stomach upset. The shampoo may cause nausea, vomiting, loose stools, or temporary irritation.

The main concern is shampoo entering the airway and lungs, especially during vomiting. This is called aspiration. Foam and liquid in the lungs can cause coughing, wheezing, breathing difficulty, or lung inflammation.

The risk also depends on the product and amount. Medicated shampoos, concentrated products, pet shampoos, and professional salon products may contain ingredients that need separate assessment. A poison information service can check the exact product rather than relying on the word "shampoo" alone.

This article cannot determine the seriousness of a specific exposure. If shampoo has been swallowed, use the product label and contact a poison information service for advice tailored to the product, amount, symptoms, age, and medical history.

Symptoms

Many people have no symptoms after swallowing a small amount of regular shampoo. When symptoms occur, they often begin soon after the exposure.

Possible symptoms include:

Coughing immediately after swallowing may mean some liquid went toward the airway. A brief cough can settle, but ongoing coughing, wheezing, chest discomfort, or shortness of breath needs prompt medical assessment.

Repeated vomiting can lead to dehydration, particularly in young children and older adults. Signs include a dry mouth, unusual tiredness, dizziness, fewer wet diapers, or passing less urine.

Severe drowsiness, confusion, seizures, collapse, or major breathing difficulty are not expected after a small taste of ordinary shampoo. If any of these occur, treat the situation as an emergency. Another substance, a large exposure, aspiration, or a particular shampoo ingredient may be involved.

Shampoo in the eyes can cause pain, redness, and tearing. This is a separate exposure from swallowing, although both can happen at the same time.

- An unpleasant taste or burning feeling in the mouth
- Nausea, stomach discomfort, or vomiting
- Loose stools or diarrhea
- Coughing, choking, gagging, or foaming at the mouth
- Throat irritation

Causes and risk factors

Shampoo swallowing is often accidental. A child may taste an accessible bottle, or an adult may accidentally swallow shampoo while bathing or rinsing hair.

Factors that can increase the chance of harm include:

The ingredients matter. Ordinary shampoos mainly contain water, surfactants, fragrances, preservatives, and conditioning agents. These usually cause irritation rather than whole-body poisoning when swallowed in small amounts.

Some dandruff or medicated shampoos contain active ingredients. Pet shampoos may contain pesticides or other substances not found in human shampoo. Combination products may also include hair dye, straightening chemicals, or other ingredients. These should not be assessed as ordinary shampoo.

- Swallowing a large or unknown amount
- Using a concentrated, medicated, pet, or professional product
- Vomiting or choking after the exposure
- Being unable to protect the airway because of extreme drowsiness
- Having an existing swallowing disorder
- Being very young, frail, or unable to describe symptoms
- Swallowing shampoo intentionally

Diagnosis

There is usually no single test that confirms shampoo swallowing. Assessment begins with what happened and what product was involved.

Useful details include the product name, ingredients, concentration, approximate amount, time of exposure, symptoms, and the affected person's age and weight. Keep the bottle or take a clear photograph of its label if it is safe to do so. Do not delay emergency care to look for packaging.

For a small exposure with no concerning symptoms, laboratory tests or scans are usually unnecessary. A poison specialist may recommend watching for symptoms at home.

Medical assessment may include checking breathing, oxygen level, heart rate, alertness, and hydration. If aspiration is suspected, a clinician may listen to the lungs and monitor symptoms. A chest X-ray or other tests may be considered when breathing symptoms are significant or persistent, but an X-ray is not routinely needed after every exposure.

Treatment and management

First, remove any shampoo still in the mouth and rinse the mouth gently with water. Do not make the person vomit. Vomiting increases the chance that foam or liquid will enter the lungs.

If the person is fully awake, breathing normally, and able to swallow, a poison specialist may advise a small amount of water. Do not force large amounts of fluid. Do not give anything by mouth to someone who is very drowsy, having a seizure, vomiting repeatedly, or having trouble swallowing.

Contact a poison information service promptly for product-specific instructions. In the United States, Poison Help is available at 1-800-222-1222 . In other countries, use the local poison centre or urgent medical advice service.

Avoid unproven home treatments. Do not give salt water, vinegar, lemon juice, oils, or other substances to "neutralize" the shampoo. Do not give activated charcoal unless a poison specialist or clinician specifically recommends it. Charcoal is not routinely useful for ordinary shampoo and can create an aspiration risk.

Treatment in a healthcare setting is supportive, meaning it manages symptoms while the body clears the substance. It may include observation, oxygen, treatment for breathing problems, or fluids for significant dehydration. There is no general antidote for shampoo.

If shampoo also entered the eyes, remove contact lenses if this is easy and rinse the eyes with clean, lukewarm running water. A poison service can advise how long to rinse and whether further care is needed.

Intentional swallowing requires urgent medical and emotional support, even if the amount appears small. The immediate toxic effects and the reasons for the exposure both need attention.

Complications

Complications are uncommon after a small swallow of ordinary shampoo, but they can occur.

Aspiration is the most important concern. Shampoo in the lungs can irritate lung tissue and cause chemical pneumonitis, which means inflammation caused by a chemical rather than an infection. Symptoms can include persistent coughing, fast breathing, wheezing, low oxygen, fever, or shortness of breath.

Repeated vomiting or diarrhea may cause dehydration. This is more concerning when the person cannot keep fluids down or is passing much less urine than usual.

A medicated, concentrated, or non-human shampoo may cause effects linked to its active ingredients. These cannot be predicted from the product category alone. The label and poison-centre assessment are important.

Forceful vomiting can also irritate the throat and, rarely, lead to aspiration. This is why vomiting should not be induced.

Prevention

Most accidental shampoo swallowing can be prevented.

Keep shampoo and other personal-care products in their original containers. Product labels help poison specialists identify ingredients and give accurate advice.

Store shampoo out of sight and reach of young children. A high, locked cupboard offers more protection than a bathroom ledge or the side of a bathtub. Close caps after every use, but do not rely on the cap alone.

Do not transfer shampoo into cups, drink bottles, or food containers. Someone may mistake it for a beverage.

Supervise young children during bathing. Put bottles away before filling the bath if a child tends to mouth or squeeze containers.

Keep pet shampoo, medicated products, salon chemicals, and concentrated refills separate from routine toiletries. Follow label instructions when diluting concentrated products.

If swallowing happened intentionally, prevention involves mental health support and safer storage rather than simply moving the bottle. Immediate help is appropriate if there is an ongoing risk of self-harm.

Living with it and what to expect

After a small accidental swallow of regular shampoo, symptoms often remain mild and settle over several hours. Temporary nausea, loose stools, or throat irritation may continue for a short time. Most people return to normal activities without lasting effects.

Follow the observation period recommended by the poison service. Watch specifically for new or worsening coughing, wheezing, unusual sleepiness, repeated vomiting, or difficulty breathing. Breathing symptoms may not always be obvious at the first moment of exposure.

If aspiration or dehydration occurs, recovery can take longer and may require hospital care. Lung irritation can take days or occasionally longer to settle. Follow-up may be needed if

coughing, reduced exercise tolerance, or breathing problems continue.

Ordinary shampoo swallowing does not usually cause a chronic condition. Once the irritation resolves, ongoing dietary restrictions or long-term treatment are generally not needed.

A different outlook may apply after a large exposure or exposure to a medicated, pet, concentrated, or industrial product. In those cases, the specific ingredients and any organ effects guide follow-up.

When to get medical help

Contact a poison information service after shampoo is swallowed, especially if the amount or product is uncertain. This is appropriate even when there are no symptoms. Keep the container nearby when calling.

Seek urgent medical assessment for:

Call emergency services now if the person:

Do not wait for poison-centre advice before calling emergency services when breathing or consciousness is affected.

Intentional swallowing also needs urgent help. If there is an immediate danger of further self-harm, call emergency services or a local crisis service and stay with the person if it is safe to do so.

- Persistent coughing, choking, or wheezing
- Repeated vomiting or inability to keep fluids down
- Increasing sleepiness, confusion, or unusual behaviour
- Significant mouth or throat pain
- Symptoms after swallowing medicated, pet, concentrated, or professional shampoo
- Any exposure involving a very young child or someone with swallowing problems
- Eye pain or vision changes that continue after rinsing
- Has difficulty breathing or is turning blue or grey
- Collapses, cannot be awakened, or has a seizure
- Cannot swallow or is drooling heavily
- Has severe choking or rapidly worsening symptoms

Common questions

Is shampoo poisonous if swallowed?

Ordinary shampoo has low toxicity in small amounts, but it can irritate the stomach and cause vomiting or diarrhea. It can be more serious if it enters the lungs or if the product contains medicated or concentrated ingredients.

What should I do if my child drank shampoo?

Remove the bottle, rinse the child's mouth, and do not induce vomiting. Contact a poison information service with the product name, estimated amount, time of exposure, and the child's age and weight. Call emergency services for breathing difficulty, severe drowsiness, collapse, or seizures.

Should I give milk or water after shampoo is swallowed?

Do not force fluids. If the person is fully awake and swallowing normally, a poison specialist may recommend a small amount of water. Milk does not neutralize shampoo. Give nothing by mouth if the person is drowsy, choking, repeatedly vomiting, or having trouble swallowing.

What happens if shampoo gets into the lungs?

It can irritate the airways and lung tissue. This may cause ongoing coughing, wheezing, fast breathing, chest discomfort, or low oxygen. These symptoms need prompt medical assessment.

How long do symptoms last after swallowing shampoo?

Mild stomach or throat symptoms often improve within several hours. Persistent or worsening symptoms are not something to manage by timing alone. Contact a poison service or seek care, especially if coughing or breathing symptoms develop.

Is medicated or pet shampoo more dangerous?

It can be. These products may contain active ingredients that require a different response from regular shampoo. Contact a poison information service and provide the exact product label rather than assuming the exposure is harmless.

Sources

- MedlinePlus Medical Encyclopedia: Shampoo poisoning , U.S. National Library of Medicine
- Poison Control: Shampoo , National Capital Poison Center
- Poison Help: What You Can Do , U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration



- NHS: Poisoning , National Health Service
- Merck Manual Consumer Version: Overview of Poisoning , Merck & Co.