CONDITION

Yew poisoning

Yew poisoning is a medical emergency caused by swallowing toxic parts of a yew plant.

WHAT IT IS
Acute poisoning from toxic chemicals in yew plants

BODY SYSTEM
Heart and circulation, digestive system, and nervous system

MAIN SYMPTOMS
Vomiting, dizziness, abnormal heartbeat, collapse

WHAT CAUSES IT
Swallowing yew leaves, seeds, bark, or clippings

HOW IT IS DIAGNOSED
Exposure history, ECG, plant identification, specialist toxin testing

MAIN TREATMENT
Emergency monitoring and intensive supportive care

CAN IT BE CURED?
Sometimes - prompt intensive support can enable recovery

IS IT AN EMERGENCY?
Yes - any suspected yew ingestion

LONG-TERM OUTLOOK
Full recovery possible; severe heart toxicity can be fatal

Overview

Yew poisoning happens when someone swallows a toxic part of a yew plant. Yews belong to the Taxus group and are commonly grown as hedges, ornamental trees, and cemetery or garden plants.

Yew contains chemicals called taxines. These interfere with the electrical signals that control the heartbeat. Significant poisoning can cause a dangerously slow, fast, or irregular heartbeat, low blood pressure, and cardiac arrest.

The leaves, seeds, bark, and wood contain toxic chemicals. The soft red flesh around a yew seed is less toxic, but the seed inside is poisonous, especially if it is chewed. Because it is difficult to know how much has been swallowed, eating any yew berry or other plant part should be treated seriously.

Yew poisoning is not contagious. It is an acute condition, meaning that it begins after an exposure rather than developing gradually over years. Symptoms can start quickly, and someone may become seriously unwell before laboratory results are available.

There is no routinely available antidote that directly reverses taxine poisoning. Treatment focuses on supporting breathing, blood pressure, and heart function while the body clears the toxins.

Symptoms

Early symptoms often involve the stomach and nervous system. Heart problems may follow or may be the first obvious sign.

Possible symptoms include:

Severe poisoning can cause very low blood pressure, loss of consciousness, or cardiac arrest. Vomiting may contain pieces of leaves, although their absence does not rule out poisoning.

Symptoms often begin within a few hours, but the timing is not predictable enough to make waiting at home safe. A person can initially appear well even after an important exposure.

- Nausea, vomiting, or stomach pain
- Dizziness, weakness, or unusual tiredness
- Confusion, agitation, or drowsiness
- A slow, fast, pounding, or irregular heartbeat
- Chest discomfort or shortness of breath
- Fainting, seizures, or sudden collapse

Causes and risk factors

Yew poisoning is caused by swallowing material from a yew plant. This may happen when someone eats leaves or berries, chews twigs, swallows hedge clippings, or uses yew in an unproven herbal preparation.

Accidental exposure may involve a young child who explores plants by mouth. Adults may mistake yew for an edible plant or use it without understanding its toxicity. Some exposures are intentional.

Risk is affected by the plant part, the amount swallowed, whether seeds or leaves were chewed, and the person's size and health. However, these details cannot reliably predict who

will become seriously ill. All suspected ingestions need immediate advice from a poison centre or emergency service.

Simply touching a yew hedge is not the usual cause of systemic poisoning. The main danger is swallowing it. Plant sap or dust may still irritate the skin or eyes, so washing after gardening is sensible.

Animals can also be poisoned by yew, particularly after eating discarded hedge clippings. A possible animal exposure needs urgent veterinary advice rather than a human poison service.

Diagnosis

Diagnosis usually begins with the exposure history. Emergency staff may ask what plant was involved, which part was swallowed, when it happened, and whether any symptoms have appeared. A photograph or safely contained sample may help identify the plant, but you should not delay emergency care to collect one.

An electrocardiogram, or ECG, records the heart's electrical activity. It may show a slow heartbeat, widened electrical signals, conduction block, or other abnormal rhythms. Continuous heart monitoring is important because the rhythm can change rapidly.

Blood tests may measure salts such as potassium and magnesium, blood acidity, kidney and liver function, and signs of poor circulation. These tests help guide supportive treatment, but an ordinary blood test does not confirm yew poisoning.

Specialist laboratories can sometimes detect taxines or related plant chemicals in blood, urine, or stomach contents. Plant fragments may also be identified. These methods are not widely or rapidly available, so emergency treatment is usually based on the history, symptoms, ECG, and plant identification rather than waiting for toxin results.

Other causes of an abnormal heartbeat or collapse may need to be considered, especially when the exposure is uncertain.

Treatment and management

Suspected yew ingestion requires emergency medical assessment. Do not make the person vomit. Do not give food, drink, medicines, or home remedies unless a poison specialist or emergency professional tells you to do so.

In hospital, treatment may include continuous ECG monitoring, intravenous fluids, oxygen, and repeated blood tests. Staff will closely watch the person's breathing, blood pressure, level of

alertness, and heart rhythm.

Activated charcoal may be considered after a recent ingestion. It can bind some poison in the digestive tract, but it is not appropriate in every case. It may be unsafe if someone is drowsy, vomiting, or unable to protect their airway unless breathing is secured.

There is no standard antidote for taxines. Doctors may use medicines or electrical treatments to manage dangerous heart rhythms and support blood pressure. The response can be unpredictable because taxines directly disrupt the heart's electrical and pumping functions.

A breathing tube and ventilator may be needed if the person cannot breathe safely or remain conscious. In the most severe cases, temporary mechanical support may be considered. This can include extracorporeal membrane oxygenation, or ECMO, which circulates blood through a machine while the heart recovers. ECMO is available only in specialist centres and is not suitable or necessary for every patient.

Some other treatments have been described in case reports, but evidence is limited. Treatment decisions are made by emergency, intensive care, heart, and poison specialists according to the person's condition.

Complications

The main complication is severe disruption of the heart rhythm. The heart may beat too slowly, too quickly, or in an uncoordinated way that cannot pump blood effectively.

Poor circulation can cause shock, meaning that the brain and other organs do not receive enough oxygen-rich blood. Cardiac arrest may occur when the heart stops pumping effectively.

Other possible complications include:

Complications are more likely when major heart abnormalities or low blood pressure develop. Even so, the early appearance of symptoms does not reliably show how the illness will progress.

- Breathing failure or inhaling vomit into the lungs
- Seizures or brain injury caused by low oxygen
- Kidney or liver injury following prolonged shock
- Injury from fainting or collapsing
- Death in severe poisoning

Prevention

Yew poisoning cannot always be prevented, especially when a plant is not recognised. Practical steps can reduce accidental exposure.

Do not eat any part of a yew plant or use it to make tea, medicine, or food. Although the red flesh around the seed is less toxic, the seed itself is poisonous, so the safest advice is not to eat yew berries.

Keep fallen berries and hedge clippings away from children and animals. Do not leave cut branches where livestock or pets can reach them. Teach children not to eat berries or leaves unless a trusted adult has confirmed they are safe.

When cutting yew, wear gardening gloves, avoid touching your mouth, and wash your hands afterward. Store garden waste securely and dispose of it according to local rules.

If you are unsure whether a plant is yew, a gardening expert or plant identification service may help. A plant-identification app alone should not be used to decide whether an exposure is safe.

Living with it and what to expect

Yew poisoning is usually a short-term medical emergency rather than a continuing illness. The most dangerous period is while taxines are affecting the heart and circulation. This may require intensive monitoring over hours or days.

Someone who remains well still needs observation for the period recommended by the poison and emergency teams. A normal early ECG does not always remove the need for monitoring after a credible ingestion.

People who survive the severe phase may recover fully, particularly if circulation and oxygen levels were maintained. Long-term problems are more likely if cardiac arrest, prolonged shock, aspiration, or brain injury occurred. Evidence about long-term outcomes is limited because serious yew poisoning is uncommon and reported cases differ greatly.

After discharge, follow-up may include checking the heart rhythm, kidney function, or recovery from intensive care. This is routine follow-up rather than emergency care unless new symptoms develop.

If the ingestion was intentional, care should also address the circumstances behind it. Mental health support and a safety plan can be as important as physical recovery. This should be offered without blame.

When to get medical help

Treat any suspected yew ingestion as an emergency, even if there are no symptoms yet. Call your local emergency number or poison centre immediately. In the United States, Poison Control is available at 1-800-222-1222.

Call emergency services now if the person has:

If the person is unconscious and not breathing normally, begin cardiopulmonary resuscitation if you are able and follow the emergency operator's instructions.

For possible exposure without swallowing, such as touching a hedge, wash the skin with soap and water. Rinse exposed eyes with clean lukewarm water. Seek poison-centre or medical advice if plant material entered the mouth, symptoms appear, or the type of exposure is uncertain.

After hospital treatment, attend planned follow-up appointments. Seek urgent reassessment for new fainting, breathing difficulty, chest symptoms, or an abnormal heartbeat.

- Fainted, collapsed, or become difficult to wake
- Trouble breathing
- A seizure
- Chest discomfort or a pounding or irregular heartbeat
- Severe dizziness, weakness, or confusion
- Repeated vomiting after a possible yew exposure

Common questions

How poisonous is yew?

Yew can cause severe poisoning because taxines interfere with the heart's electrical system. The outcome cannot be judged safely from the apparent amount swallowed or from how well someone initially looks. Any suspected ingestion needs immediate expert advice.

Are yew berries poisonous?

The red fleshy covering is less toxic than most of the plant, but the seed inside is poisonous. Chewing a seed can release its contents. Because berries are easily swallowed whole or chewed, eating them should be treated as a possible poisoning.

How quickly does yew poisoning start?

Symptoms often begin within a few hours and may sometimes develop rapidly. There is no

reliable symptom-free waiting period that makes home observation safe after a suspected ingestion.

Can touching a yew tree poison me?

Ordinary skin contact is unlikely to cause systemic taxine poisoning. Swallowing plant material is the main risk. Wash your hands after handling yew, and rinse the skin or eyes if they are exposed to sap or plant dust.

What should I do if my child eats yew?

Remove any visible plant material from the mouth without forcing your fingers into the throat. Do not cause vomiting. Call emergency services or a poison centre immediately, even if your child seems well. Take a photograph of the plant only if this can be done without delaying care.

Can someone recover from yew poisoning?

Yes, recovery is possible, including after serious poisoning, when heart and circulation can be supported until the toxins clear. However, severe rhythm problems may be resistant to treatment and can be fatal. The individual outlook is shaped mainly by the degree and duration of heart, circulation, and oxygen problems.

Sources

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