Illinois Poison Center Experts Warn of Allergy Medication Dangers

Epinephrine auto-injectors pose safety risk

(Chicago) – As the Midwest tackles another bee season, the Illinois Poison Center urges Illinois residents who are allergic to the insects to use extreme caution if and when they use epinephrine auto-injectors. Epinephrine auto-injectors are used to administer epinephrine, which is the definitive emergency treatment for severe allergic reactions. These reactions, called anaphylaxis, can be deadly within minutes if untreated. However, an accidental injection or misuse of the auto-injector also can have dangerous consequences. The Illinois Poison Center receives the vast majority of its calls regarding these types of poisoning exposures during the warmer summer months.

"When used correctly, an epinephrine auto-injector can be a life-saving instrument," explains Dr. Michael Wahl, managing medical director of the Illinois Poison Center. "However, if it is misused, or if a child accidentally injects themselves in the wrong place, such as a hand or finger, it can potentially cause serious health problems."

Staying Safe

It is very important to keep epinephrine auto-injectors out of children’s sight and reach. Extreme caution must be used in the administration of the medication. People with known allergies should learn how to self-administer epinephrine correctly. They should also replace the device before the labeled expiration date.

How Epinephrine Can Help

Epinephrine temporarily reverses an allergic reaction by constricting blood vessels and relaxing lung muscles. This improves breathing and decreases any swelling, which may provide the time needed to get further treatment in a health care facility. People who have a known allergy to certain substances, bee stings or nuts for example, may carry an epinephrine auto-injector with them.

The Dangers

The most common type of call the IPC receives involving these injectors is regarding someone who has accidentally injected himself with it, usually in the fingertip or palm of their hand. The blood vessels in these areas are very small and when epinephrine is injected in these areas, constriction of the blood vessels can
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cause a loss of blood flow, resulting in blanched, cool skin. If this loss of blood flow continues for too long, the tissue can die.

In an Emergency

These types of poisonings often require a visit to the emergency department; however, the trained toxicology experts staffing the poison center will provide callers with immediate treatment recommendations as appropriate. Possible treatment options may include massaging the area and soaking the area in warm water, in attempt to restore blood flow. If a poisoning concerning an epinephrine auto-injector is suspected, call the Illinois Poison Center immediately at 1-800-222-1222 – do not wait for symptoms to appear.

Editor’s Note: Poison center experts are available for news media interviews. Contact the IPC public affairs staff at 312-906-6146 to arrange an interview.

The Illinois Poison Center serves all of Illinois – 24 hours a day, 365 days a year – via a national, toll-free number, 1-800-222-1222. Staffed by pharmacists, physicians, nurses and poison information providers, the IPC provides poison prevention information and treatment advice on household products, medication issues, alcohol and drug misuse, bites and stings and other poisonings.

The IPC is a program of the Metropolitan Chicago Healthcare Council, an association comprising more than 140 hospitals and health care organizations working together to improve the delivery of health care services in the Chicago area.