For Immediate Release

Contact: Robin Antognoli 312/906-6146
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Illinois Poison Center Revises Recommendations: 
Discontinue At-Home Use of Syrup of Ipecac and Activated Charcoal

(Chicago) – The Illinois Poison Center (IPC) urges parents and caregivers to discontinue household use of syrup of ipecac and activated charcoal, two drug therapies used to remove matter from the stomach to treat ingestion of toxic substances. The IPC instead encourages that people contact the poison center immediately at 1-800-222-1222 when a potential poisoning case occurs.

This revision reverses a long-standing recommendation that every household stock syrup of ipecac and activated charcoal for use in the event of a poisoning incident.

Current available medical studies neither support nor refute use of ipecac syrup, causing some in the medical community to challenge its use as an at-home treatment for poisoning cases. In addition to a lack of scientific evidence, an examination of poison center data revealed that administration of ipecac syrup did not have an effect on patient outcomes. More importantly, the use of ipecac syrup did not reduce referrals to a hospital. Its administration at home could actually hinder medical care in the hospital setting, potentially making it more difficult for the patient to keep down activated charcoal or other treatment therapies.

In-home use of ipecac syrup had been recommended since the 1960s to treat poisoning cases on-site in order to eliminate the need to transport the victim to a hospital or, in more serious poisoning cases, to begin emptying the stomach contents as quickly as possible, prior to transporting a patient to the emergency department.

Similar lack of clinical-based evidence related to activated charcoal, a substance that binds with the poison in the stomach to eliminate it naturally, has led the IPC to reverse its recommendation regarding the use of this drug therapy in the home as well.

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The IPC reversal follows an updated recommendation from the American Academy of Pediatrics announced on November 3, 2003. The American Association of Poison Control Centers also is studying this issue and is expected to make a recommendation in early 2004.

Dr. Michael Wahl, administrative medical director of the IPC and an emergency department physician, stresses that the change in recommendations should positively affect patient care without an adverse effect on patient outcomes. “As physicians, we commit to the Hippocratic Oath – first, do no harm,” said Wahl. “Use of ipecac syrup is unpleasant for patients, and when medical data does not support the use of the drug therapy and other positive medical options exist, there is no reason to subject any individual to that level of discomfort.”

Questions or comments regarding the use of syrup of ipecac or activated charcoal, including the safe use of these drug therapies in a health care facility, may be directed to the IPC at 1-800-222-1222.