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For Immediate Release
January 19, 2006

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Children and Medicine: Prevent Accidental Poisonings

Illinois Poison Center experts present tips for caregivers

(Chicago) – Hospital emergency departments in the United States treated an estimated 53,517 children aged 4 years and under for accidental exposures to medicine annually from 2001 to 2003, according to a recent report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). In 2005 alone, the Illinois Poison Center (IPC) handled more than 23,000 calls related to medicines involving children 5 years of age and under.

“Young children are at great risk for accidental poisoning from medicine,” said Dr. Michael Wahl, managing medical director of the Illinois Poison Center. “Children are naturally curious and often mimic adults. They see us take a pill, and then the next opportunity they get, they want to put it in their mouth too.”

Wahl also notes that some telephone calls to the IPC hot line are related to parents accidentally giving their children more than the recommended dose of a medicine.

Poison center experts urge parents and caregivers to be extra cautious to reduce these types of accidental poisonings, especially now as parents continue to treat their children's cold and flu symptoms.

Avoid Accidental Ingestions - Store Medicines Safely

Most accidental poisonings that occur with medicine can be prevented. Many accidental poisonings happen when a child gets into medicine that has been left out and is easily accessible, such as medication left on a nightstand or inside a purse. Take these simple precautions to prevent children from exploring potentially dangerous situations:

- Store medicine and vitamins in locked cabinets where children cannot see them or reach them.
- Never refer to medicine as candy or make a game out of taking it.
- After you use a medicine, put the safety cap back on tightly.
- If you keep your medicine in a pillbox or "pill-minder," remember that these containers are not child-resistant and should be kept out of children's reach.
- Dispose of expired medicines by flushing them down the toilet. Rinse out containers before throwing them away.

Prevent Medication Mishaps – Follow Directions

Some medicine-related poisonings occur when parents and other caregivers accidentally give a child the wrong dose of medicine. The following tips will help ensure the correct dosage is given and avoid a potential poisoning:

- Adults should give all medicine to young children; never allow children to take it themselves
- Understand the directions and follow them exactly. Call your doctor, pharmacist or the Illinois Poison Center if you have any questions.
- Know the child's weight. Doses for many children's medicines are measured by weight or age.
- Always use the measuring device that comes with the medicine or a device that shows exact amounts. Know the difference between a teaspoon (tsp) and a tablespoon (Tbs).
- Make sure another caregiver in the household has not already given the child a dose of medicine.

The CDC Report

The CDC based its estimated poisonings in children from 2001 to 2003 on records of more than 3,600 children treated at U.S. hospitals for unintended, nonfatal, exposure to medications during that time period. Children exposed to illicit drugs or alcohol were not included in the analysis. Most kids were 1 or 2 years old at the time of the medication mishaps, three-quarters of which happened at home.

Additional medicine safety information

The Illinois Poison Center offers free medicine safety advice on its Web site, www.IllinoisPoisonCenter.org under the Poisoning Hazards section. An informative medicine safety brochure and other useful poison prevention information also is included in the IPC's complimentary packet of poison safety information, which is available to all Illinois residents. Get one today by visiting the poison center Web site or calling the Illinois Poison Center hot line at 1-800-222-1222.

Getting help in an emergency

If you suspect a poisoning, do not wait for symptoms to appear. Contact the Illinois Poison Center immediately at 1-800-222-1222. Post this number in a highly visible and central location year-round.

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Editor's Note: Poison center experts are available for news media interviews. Contact the IPC public affairs at 312-906-6146 or 312-906-6142 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.