

## VITAMIN OVERDOSES DANGEROUS FOR CHILDREN

DALLAS—May 28, 1993—Remember the song lyrics, "A spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down"?

Most medications infants and children take today are sweetened. But these medicines and vitamins may taste so good that they entice children to take too many tablets—if they get their hands on the bottle.

Statistics from the American Association of Poison Control Centers indicate that more than 2 percent of calls to Poison Control Centers are related to vitamin overdoses.

Dr. Robert Wiebe, a professor of pediatrics and holder of the Sarah M. and Charles E. Seay Distinguished Chair in Pediatric Emergency Medicine at The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas, says most parents are careful to put away medicines and things that say "poison" on the bottle, but are sometimes careless with vitamins.

When children take too many vitamins, even children's vitamins, the most serious consequence is iron toxicity, Wiebe said.

"Statistics show 53 children younger than 6 died as a result of unintentional ingestion of pharmaceutical products between 1983 and 1990," Wiebe said. "Iron supplements caused more than 30 percent of these deaths."

Severe overdoses of vitamins with iron or whole iron tablets need immediate attention, because they can cause cardio-vascular damage and dangerous gastrointestinal bleeding. Milder cases of iron poisoning can cause vomiting and diarrhea or constipation.

If an overdose is caught early enough, doctors can pump fluids into the child's stomach to wash the pills through the gastrointestinal tract swiftly to prevent absorption. If the number of pills ingested is unknown, X-rays can show how many pills are sitting in the stomach or

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CONTACT: Lynn Gentry  
(214) 648-3404

gastro-intestinal tract, Wiebe said. But this technique only works to detect whole iron tablets. Multi-vitamins don't show up on X-rays.

"I think it's fine to give vitamins to children," Wiebe said. "However, I'm concerned that too many parents encourage their children to take their vitamins or medicines by pretending that the pill or syrup is a candy. Children then develop the idea that it's okay to take as much as they want. That creates a very dangerous situation."

Wiebe offers this advice for parents:

- Store all medicines and vitamins in locked cabinets.
- Keep the poison control center phone number handy (In the Dallas area—(214) 590-5000).
- Don't underestimate the seriousness of an overdose of any kind.
- Don't pretend the medicine or vitamin tablet is a treat.
- Buy vitamins with child-resistant caps.

One other way to prevent accidental vitamin poisoning might be to buy vitamins in smaller containers.

"If you can find your multi-vitamins or prenatal iron tablets in bottles with 30 pills or fewer, buying the smaller bottle would limit the number of pills a child could possibly take at once."

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NOTE: The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas comprises Southwestern Medical School, Southwestern Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences, Southwestern Allied Health Sciences School, affiliated teaching hospitals and outpatient clinics.