

Possible Mercury Poisoning Oregon Poison Center

A few months ago, Registered Nurse SPI (Specialist in Poison Information) received a call from a mother whose child had been sick for the last week. Mom had just found a jar of liquid mercury in their home. Her child had four friends who were also ill. Most of their symptoms were the same. The children had an itchy rash mainly on their trunk areas, fever, headache, cough, fast heart rate, nausea, and vomiting. Mom wondered if the mercury made them sick.

The SPI informed the mother that their symptoms possibly were due to mercury exposure. All of them, ages 10 - 12, needed medical assessment, testing and perhaps treatment. It turned out all of the children had elevated mercury levels. This incident was the beginning of a 3-month duration of treatment by the Oregon Poison Center (OPC) staff for at least ten children and four adults; The OPC was the hub for their care. The SPIs contacted our patients' primary healthcare providers and three hospitals in Oregon and Washington to provide recommendations on managing their treatment.

We advised giving the patients an oral medicine which is the antidote for mercury poisoning. They were treated at home with frequent follow-up by the poison center. This antidote was not commonly available in community pharmacies, so we involved two hospital pharmacies for assistance.

To identify, test, and clean up the mercury, the SPIs and toxicologists collaborated with state and federal agencies. We contacted the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ), Oregon Emergency Response System (OERS), County Public Health Departments, and Oregon Hazmat. Throughout this whole ordeal, the families were frightened and confused. None of the staff at the OPC ever saw the children or held the hands of the scared mothers, but we were always available for them. We empowered them with knowledge, resources and support. In the first 24 hours of this case, there were over 30 interactions between the OPC and the families, healthcare providers and agencies.

The children have recovered. Mothers may still be worried, but they know that OPC is there as a trustworthy and reliable source of information for their families and their community. *The poison center is an emergency hot line, but we always follow our cases until we are certain we are no longer needed.*