CONDITION

Jerusalem cherry poisoning

Jerusalem cherry poisoning is a toxic reaction caused by swallowing berries or other parts of the Jerusalem cherry plant.

WHAT IT IS
Toxic reaction after swallowing Jerusalem cherry plant material

BODY SYSTEM
Digestive, nervous, and heart and circulation

MAIN SYMPTOMS
Nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, drowsiness

WHAT CAUSES IT
Swallowing solanocapsine-containing berries or other plant parts

HOW IT IS DIAGNOSED
Exposure history, symptoms, examination, and plant identification

MAIN TREATMENT
Supportive care and symptom monitoring

CAN IT BE CURED?
Yes - poisoning usually resolves with supportive care

IS IT AN EMERGENCY?
Sometimes - collapse, seizures, breathing trouble, or severe confusion

LONG-TERM OUTLOOK
Full recovery is common when serious complications are avoided

Overview

Jerusalem cherry poisoning happens after someone swallows part of the Jerusalem cherry plant, Solanum pseudocapsicum . This ornamental plant has small round berries that may turn orange or red. Despite its name, it is not an edible cherry.

The plant belongs to the nightshade family, which also includes tomatoes and potatoes. Jerusalem cherry contains toxic plant chemicals, including solanocapsine. The berries are the part most likely to be eaten, but the leaves and other plant parts should not be swallowed either.

Poisoning mainly affects the digestive and nervous systems. It can also affect heart rate, blood pressure, and breathing in more serious cases. Many exposures cause mild or no symptoms, but it is difficult to predict the effect from the number or colour of berries alone.

If someone may have swallowed Jerusalem cherry, contact a poison information service promptly. Do not wait for symptoms to appear.

Symptoms

Symptoms often involve the stomach and intestines. They can include:

Symptoms may begin within several hours, but they are not always immediate. A person who looks well soon after an exposure could still need observation or advice from a poison specialist.

Severe poisoning is less common. Warning signs include marked sleepiness, difficulty waking, seizures, collapse, breathing difficulty, or severe confusion. Heart rhythm changes and very low blood pressure are also possible.

Young children may not be able to explain nausea, dizziness, or visual changes. Watch for repeated vomiting, unusual sleepiness, poor balance, confusion, or behaviour that is clearly different from normal.

These symptoms can have many causes. Their presence does not by itself confirm Jerusalem cherry poisoning.

- Nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea, or abdominal pain
- Headache, dizziness, weakness, or drowsiness
- Confusion, unusual behaviour, agitation, or hallucinations
- Changes in pupil size, heart rate, or blood pressure

Causes and risk factors

Poisoning is caused by swallowing berries, leaves, or other parts of the Jerusalem cherry plant. The plant's toxic alkaloids interfere with normal digestive, nerve, and cardiovascular function.

The actual dose of toxin can differ between plants and plant parts. Ripeness, growing conditions, and the amount swallowed may influence the effect. For this reason, berry colour or an estimated berry count cannot reliably show whether an exposure is safe.

Accidental poisoning is more likely when the plant is kept indoors or in a garden where young children can reach it. Its bright berries may be mistaken for edible fruit. Adults may also confuse it with another plant or assume that "cherry" means it is safe to eat.

Touching the plant does not usually cause systemic poisoning, which means poisoning

throughout the body. However, plant material should be washed off the hands and kept away from the eyes and mouth.

Diagnosis

There is no routine blood test that specifically confirms Jerusalem cherry poisoning. Diagnosis is usually based on the exposure history, the person's symptoms, a physical examination, and identification of the plant.

A clear photograph can help a poison specialist or healthcare professional identify the plant. If it can be done safely, keep a sample in a sealed container and away from children. Do not handle or taste an unknown plant to identify it.

Medical assessment may include checks of temperature, alertness, breathing, heart rate, blood pressure, and hydration. An electrocardiogram, or ECG, records the heart's electrical activity and may be used if there are significant symptoms.

Blood tests may check salts, kidney function, blood sugar, or other possible causes of the symptoms. These tests show how the body is being affected rather than confirming the plant toxin itself.

Treatment and management

There is no specific antidote for Jerusalem cherry poisoning. Treatment is supportive, meaning that it protects important body functions and treats symptoms while the toxin is cleared.

Immediately remove any remaining berries or plant pieces from the mouth. Gently rinse the mouth with water. Do not make the person vomit, and do not give home remedies intended to "neutralise" the poison. These actions may cause choking, aspiration, or further irritation.

Contact a poison information service for advice even if there are no symptoms. In the United States, Poison Control can be reached at 1-800-222-1222. Elsewhere, use the local poison centre or urgent medical advice service. Be ready to describe the plant, the part involved, the estimated amount, when it happened, the person's age, and any symptoms.

Some people can be watched at home after poison-centre assessment. Others need evaluation in an emergency department, especially when the amount is uncertain, symptoms are developing, or the person is very young or medically vulnerable.

Hospital treatment may include:

Activated charcoal can bind some poisons in the digestive tract. It is only considered in

selected situations, usually soon after a significant ingestion and when it can be given safely. It should not be used at home unless a poison specialist specifically directs it.

- Monitoring of breathing, alertness, blood pressure, and heart rhythm
- Fluids through a vein if vomiting or diarrhoea causes dehydration
- Medicines to control severe nausea, agitation, or seizures
- Oxygen or breathing support if normal breathing is affected

Complications

Repeated vomiting or diarrhoea can cause dehydration and an imbalance of body salts. Vomit can enter the lungs if a person is very drowsy or has a seizure. This is called aspiration.

More serious nervous-system effects can include delirium, seizures, loss of consciousness, or impaired breathing. Heart rhythm or blood pressure changes may also require monitoring and treatment.

Lasting complications are unusual after mild poisoning resolves. Severe poisoning can have longer effects if it causes prolonged breathing problems, very low blood pressure, or another major complication.

Prevention

Jerusalem cherry poisoning is usually preventable by avoiding access to the plant. If young children live in or regularly visit your home, the safest approach is not to keep Jerusalem cherry within their reach. Consider removing it entirely rather than placing it on a higher surface that could still be reached by climbing.

Keep the plant's label, but do not rely on the name to show that it is edible. Teach children never to eat berries or leaves from an indoor plant or garden unless a trusted adult has confirmed that they are food.

Do not use Jerusalem cherry berries in cooking, decorations involving food, or homemade remedies. Cooking should not be assumed to make the plant safe.

After gardening or handling the plant, wash your hands before eating or touching your face. Dispose of fallen berries where children and pets cannot reach them.

Living with it and what to expect

Jerusalem cherry poisoning is an acute event, not a long-term condition. Its course is usually measured in hours or days rather than months or years.

A person with no symptoms or only mild digestive symptoms may need observation based on poison-centre advice. Symptoms that do occur often improve as the body clears the toxin. More significant poisoning may require hospital monitoring until alertness, hydration, breathing, blood pressure, and heart rhythm are stable.

Most people who recover fully do not need long-term treatment. Jerusalem cherry poisoning does not remain dormant in the body or repeatedly return after the toxin has cleared.

Routine follow-up may be appropriate if vomiting, weakness, poor appetite, concentration problems, or other symptoms continue after the expected recovery period. Follow-up is also important after a serious hospital-treated exposure or if another health condition may have been affected.

A future exposure can cause poisoning again. Recovery from one episode does not create immunity.

When to get medical help

Contact a poison information service promptly whenever Jerusalem cherry may have been swallowed. This is appropriate even when the person feels well because symptoms can be delayed and the amount of toxin is difficult to estimate.

Seek urgent medical assessment if the person develops repeated vomiting, significant abdominal pain, increasing drowsiness, confusion, unusual behaviour, weakness, or trouble walking. The poison service can help determine whether home observation, an urgent clinic visit, or emergency department care is appropriate.

Call emergency services immediately if the person:

While waiting for emergency help, do not give food or drink to someone who is drowsy, confused, seizing, or unable to swallow safely. If the person is unconscious but breathing, place them on their side if you can do so safely.

- Has difficulty breathing or develops blue or grey lips
- Collapses, cannot be woken, or has a seizure
- Has severe confusion, extreme agitation, or hallucinations
- Appears to be choking or has inhaled vomit

- Develops signs of shock, such as fainting with cold or clammy skin

Common questions

Are Jerusalem cherry berries poisonous?

Yes. The berries contain toxic plant chemicals and should not be eaten. Other parts of the plant should also be treated as poisonous. The berries can look attractive and edible, especially to children.

How many Jerusalem cherry berries are dangerous?

There is no reliable number that separates a harmless exposure from a dangerous one. Toxin levels and berry sizes are not consistent, and the person's age, body size, symptoms, and health also matter. Contact a poison information service rather than trying to calculate the risk yourself.

What should I do if my child ate a berry?

Remove any remaining plant material from the mouth and rinse the mouth gently. Do not cause vomiting. Contact a poison information service straight away and keep the plant or a photograph available for identification. Call emergency services if your child becomes difficult to wake, has trouble breathing, collapses, or has a seizure.

Can I wait to see whether symptoms develop?

Do not make that decision without poison-centre advice. Symptoms may not start immediately, and a person can appear well soon after the exposure. A poison specialist can recommend the right observation based on the details.

Is Jerusalem cherry the same as a normal cherry or tomato?

No. It is an ornamental nightshade, not an edible cherry. Although it is related to tomatoes and potatoes, this does not make its fruit safe to eat.

Can touching Jerusalem cherry poison me?

Systemic poisoning mainly follows swallowing the plant. Touching it is much less likely to cause poisoning. Wash your hands after handling it, avoid touching your eyes or mouth, and keep plant material away from children.

Sources

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