CONDITION

# Poinsettia plant exposure

Poinsettia plant exposure is contact with or swallowing plant material that may cause mild irritation.

**WHAT IT IS**
Irritation after contact with or swallowing poinsettia

**BODY SYSTEM**
Digestive system, skin, eyes, and airways

**MAIN SYMPTOMS**
Mouth irritation, nausea, vomiting, skin rash

**WHAT CAUSES IT**
Contact with poinsettia sap or plant material

**HOW IT IS DIAGNOSED**
Exposure history and symptom assessment

**MAIN TREATMENT**
Rinsing, washing, fluids, and supportive care

**CAN IT BE CURED?**
Yes - effects usually resolve with supportive care

**IS IT AN EMERGENCY?**
Sometimes - breathing trouble or severe swelling

**LONG-TERM OUTLOOK**
Full recovery expected after most mild exposures

## Overview

Poinsettia plant exposure happens when someone touches, chews, or swallows part of a poinsettia plant. Sap may also get into the eyes. Poinsettias are flowering plants often kept indoors during the winter holidays.

The plant's red, pink, or white sections are modified leaves called bracts. Like other members of the Euphorbia plant family, poinsettias contain a milky white sap. This sap can irritate the mouth, skin, and eyes. Swallowing plant material may upset the stomach.

Poinsettias are commonly described as highly poisonous, but this reputation is not supported by evidence from poison-centre cases. Most accidental exposures cause no symptoms or only mild, short-lived irritation. Serious reactions are uncommon.

The amount involved, the part of the body exposed, and the symptoms that follow are more useful than the fact that contact occurred. A poison centre can help assess a specific exposure without assuming that poisoning has taken place.

## Symptoms

Many people have no symptoms after touching or taking a small bite of a poinsettia. When symptoms occur, they usually begin soon after exposure.

Chewing or swallowing the plant may cause:

Sap on the skin can cause redness, itching, or a rash. People who are sensitive to latex may be more likely to react because poinsettia sap contains proteins that can resemble natural rubber latex proteins.

Sap in an eye can cause immediate burning, redness, watering, or blurred vision. Rubbing the eye may make the irritation worse.

Rarely, an allergic reaction can cause hives, swelling, wheezing, or difficulty breathing. A large piece of leaf or stem can also cause choking, particularly in a young child. Choking is a physical blockage and is separate from the plant's irritating effects.

- Burning or irritation of the lips, mouth, or throat
- Nausea, vomiting, stomach pain, or diarrhoea
- Coughing or gagging from irritation or a plant piece

## Causes and risk factors

Exposure is caused by direct contact with poinsettia leaves, stems, flowers, or milky sap. It commonly happens when a young child takes a bite, an adult trims a damaged stem, or sap is transferred from the hands to the eyes.

Factors that can increase the chance of symptoms include:

The plant is not dangerous simply because it is in the same room. Touching an undamaged leaf may cause no reaction. Problems are more likely when a stem or leaf is broken and releases sap.

An artificial poinsettia does not contain plant sap, but small decorations may still present a choking risk.

- Getting sap directly into an eye

- Prolonged skin contact with the sap
- Chewing or swallowing more plant material
- Having sensitive skin, eczema, or a latex allergy
- Being too young to describe symptoms or spit out plant pieces

## Diagnosis

There is no routine blood test that confirms poinsettia exposure. Assessment is usually based on what happened, the plant involved, the amount that may have been swallowed, and any symptoms.

If the plant's identity is uncertain, a clear photograph can help a poison centre or healthcare professional identify it. Do not handle an unknown plant more than necessary, especially if it is leaking sap.

An examination may be needed for continuing vomiting, an allergic reaction, or significant eye symptoms. For eye pain or ongoing blurred vision, a clinician may examine the surface of the eye for a scratch or chemical irritation.

Other causes may need to be considered if symptoms are severe, delayed, or do not fit the reported exposure. Another plant, pesticide, plant food, or decorative product may sometimes be responsible.

## Treatment and management

Most mild poinsettia exposures can be managed with prompt rinsing and observation. Contact a poison centre for advice tailored to the person's age, symptoms, and type of exposure.

If plant material was put in the mouth, remove any remaining pieces and rinse the mouth gently. A person who is fully awake and swallowing normally may take a few sips of water. Do not make the person vomit. Vomiting does not reliably remove the material and may cause further irritation.

For sap on the skin, wash the area with soap and water. Remove clothing that has wet sap on it. Try not to touch the face or eyes until the hands are clean.

For eye exposure, remove contact lenses if they come out easily. Rinse the open eye with clean, lukewarm running water for 15 to 20 minutes. Encourage blinking during rinsing. Do not delay rinsing while looking for eye drops.

Medical treatment is supportive, meaning it controls symptoms while the irritation settles. It may include fluids for significant vomiting, treatment for nausea, care for an eye injury, or treatment of an allergic reaction. Severe allergic symptoms require emergency care.

Keep the plant or a photograph available when contacting a poison centre. Do not delay urgent care to search for the plant.

## Complications

Complications are unusual after a small accidental exposure. Possible problems include dehydration if vomiting or diarrhoea continues, a persistent skin reaction, or injury to the eye's clear surface.

A plant piece lodged in the airway can cause choking. This requires immediate first aid and emergency help.

A serious allergic reaction is also possible, although uncommon. Warning signs include swelling of the tongue or throat, widespread hives, wheezing, faintness, or difficulty breathing.

Symptoms that continue or worsen may have another cause. For example, a plant could have pesticide residue, or the plant may have been identified incorrectly.

## Prevention

Poinsettia exposure can often be prevented, but it is not necessary for every household to avoid the plant completely.

Place poinsettias where young children and pets cannot chew them or pull them down. Clean up fallen leaves and broken stems promptly. Remember that a high shelf is only useful if it is stable and cannot be reached by climbing.

Wear gloves when pruning or repotting the plant if you have sensitive skin or a latex allergy. Wash your hands after handling broken stems, and avoid touching your eyes.

Keep poinsettias separate from food preparation areas. Do not use their leaves or bracts as edible decorations unless they are clearly artificial and made for food contact.

Teach children not to eat any houseplant. Plant labels are helpful, but they should not replace safe placement and supervision.

## Living with it and what to expect

Poinsettia exposure is an event rather than a long-term illness. Most people with mild mouth, stomach, or skin irritation recover after the material is removed and the affected area is rinsed or washed.

Symptoms usually settle without ongoing treatment. A skin rash may last longer than brief mouth irritation, especially if exposure was prolonged. Eye symptoms should improve after thorough rinsing; continuing pain or vision changes need assessment.

Routine follow-up is generally unnecessary once symptoms have fully resolved. Poinsettia exposure is not known to build up in the body or cause a chronic condition after a typical accidental contact.

Someone who has reacted to the sap may react again with future exposure. Avoiding direct contact and wearing gloves can reduce this risk. A person who had a significant allergic reaction should discuss future plant and latex exposure with a healthcare professional.

## When to get medical help

Contact a poison centre promptly if someone has swallowed poinsettia material, especially if the amount is uncertain, the person is very young, or symptoms have started. In the United States, Poison Help is available at 1-800-222-1222. Elsewhere, contact your local poison information service.

Seek same-day medical advice if there is:

Call emergency services immediately for difficulty breathing, severe swelling of the lips, tongue, or throat, collapse, a seizure, or inability to wake the person.

If someone is choking and cannot breathe, speak, or cough effectively, begin age-appropriate choking first aid and call emergency services. Do not put your fingers into the mouth unless you can clearly see and safely remove the object.

Routine follow-up is not usually needed when a small exposure causes no symptoms or when mild symptoms completely resolve.

- Repeated vomiting or an inability to keep fluids down
- Ongoing stomach pain or diarrhoea
- A spreading or painful skin reaction
- Eye pain, light sensitivity, blurred vision, or redness after rinsing
- Mouth or throat irritation that is not improving

## Common questions

Are poinsettias really poisonous?

Poinsettias can cause irritation, but they are not considered highly poisonous. Many small accidental exposures cause no symptoms. Chewing the plant may irritate the mouth or upset the stomach, while its milky sap may irritate skin and eyes.

What should I do if my child bites a poinsettia leaf?

Remove any pieces from the mouth and rinse the mouth gently. Do not cause vomiting. If your child is awake and swallowing normally, a few sips of water may help clear the taste. Contact a poison centre with the child's age, symptoms, and the amount that may be missing from the plant.

How much poinsettia is dangerous?

There is no single amount that predicts symptoms for everyone. Most small bites cause little or no illness, but the amount, the person's age, and current symptoms all matter. A poison centre can assess the specific situation.

Can touching a poinsettia cause a rash?

Yes. The milky sap released from broken leaves or stems can cause redness, itching, or a contact rash. Wash the area with soap and water. Seek advice if the rash spreads, becomes painful, or is accompanied by facial swelling or breathing problems.

What happens if poinsettia sap gets in my eye?

It can cause burning, redness, watering, and blurred vision. Rinse the open eye with lukewarm water for 15 to 20 minutes. Get medical help if pain, redness, light sensitivity, or vision changes continue after rinsing.

Are poinsettias dangerous to cats and dogs?

Chewing poinsettia may irritate a pet's mouth or cause drooling, vomiting, or diarrhoea. Serious poisoning is not expected in most cases, but contact a veterinarian or animal poison service if your pet has symptoms, swallowed a large amount, or may have eaten another plant or chemical.

## Sources

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