CONDITION

Sachet poisoning

Sachet poisoning is harm caused by swallowing, inhaling, or touching the contents of a small sealed packet.

WHAT IT IS
Harmful exposure to contents of a small sealed packet

BODY SYSTEM
Digestive, breathing, nervous system, skin, and eyes

MAIN SYMPTOMS
Nausea, coughing, drowsiness, eye or skin irritation

WHAT CAUSES IT
Toxic chemical exposure from swallowed, inhaled, or spilled contents

HOW IT IS DIAGNOSED
Exposure history, examination, and product-specific tests

MAIN TREATMENT
Poison-centre guidance, supportive care, and toxin-specific antidotes

CAN IT BE CURED?
Sometimes - most exposures resolve, but severe damage may remain

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

LONG-TERM OUTLOOK
Most recover, but corrosive or pesticide exposures may cause lasting harm

Overview

"Sachet poisoning" is not the name of one specific poison. It describes harmful exposure to something packaged in a small sealed packet or pouch. The risk comes from the contents, not from the sachet itself.

Possible products include concentrated laundry detergent, pesticides, rodent poison, medicines, nicotine, cleaning chemicals, desiccants, and other household or workplace products. Different products can affect the body in very different ways.

Exposure may happen through swallowing the contents, breathing in powder or fumes, or getting the product on the skin or in the eyes. A torn packet may also create a choking risk, particularly for a young child.

Some sachets, such as many plain silica-gel packets, usually cause little or no poisoning if swallowed. However, it is not safe to assume that every packet marked "do not eat" contains silica gel. The original packaging or product label is important for identifying what was involved.

Because serious effects are not always immediate, contact a poison information service promptly after a possible exposure. Do not wait for symptoms if the product is unknown, concentrated, or potentially toxic.

Symptoms

Symptoms depend on the chemical, the amount involved, how it entered the body, and the person's age and health. Children may become unwell after smaller amounts than adults.

Common early symptoms include:

Concentrated detergent can cause repeated vomiting, coughing, drowsiness, and eye injury. If vomit or detergent enters the lungs, breathing symptoms may develop.

Nicotine exposure may cause nausea, vomiting, dizziness, sweating, weakness, agitation, or changes in heart rate. Some pesticides can cause excessive saliva, sweating, vomiting, small pupils, muscle twitching, confusion, or breathing problems.

Certain rodenticides, medicines, or chemicals may cause delayed symptoms. These can include unusual bleeding, liver injury, kidney problems, or changes in alertness. Feeling well immediately after an exposure does not always mean that no harm will occur.

- Nausea, vomiting, stomach pain, or diarrhoea
- Coughing, choking, wheezing, or a sore throat
- Burning, redness, or watering of the eyes
- Skin redness, pain, or blistering
- Headache, dizziness, sweating, or unusual sleepiness
- A fast or unusually slow heartbeat

Causes and risk factors

Sachet poisoning happens when the contents of a packet enter the body in a harmful amount. Accidental exposures often occur when a sachet looks like food, sweets, or a toy, or when it is stored where a child can reach it.

Medicine sachets can cause poisoning if too many are taken, if the same active ingredient is

also present in another medicine, or if a child swallows them. The amount of powder in a packet does not show how strong it is.

Risk can also come from products being transferred into unlabelled containers. Without the original packet or box, it may be difficult to identify the chemical and choose the right monitoring or treatment.

Factors that may increase the chance of serious effects include:

Workplace exposure may happen when sachets are opened, mixed, or handled without suitable ventilation or protective equipment.

- Exposure in a baby or young child
- An unknown product or unknown amount
- Concentrated pesticide, rodenticide, nicotine, medicine, or cleaning chemical
- Swallowing combined with coughing or choking
- Exposure to the eyes
- Existing breathing, heart, liver, or kidney problems
- Intentional swallowing or suspected self-harm
- Delayed access to poison advice or medical care

Diagnosis

Diagnosis begins by identifying the product and assessing what happened. A healthcare professional or poison specialist may ask for the product name, active ingredients, packet size, estimated amount, time of exposure, and whether it was swallowed, inhaled, or spilled.

Keep the packet, label, or outer box if this can be done safely. A photograph may help when speaking to a poison service. Do not handle leaking material with bare hands.

An examination may include breathing, heart rate, blood pressure, temperature, alertness, pupil size, skin, mouth, and eyes. Oxygen levels and an electrocardiogram, or ECG, may be checked. An ECG records the heart's electrical activity.

Testing is based on the product rather than on the word "sachet." Blood tests may check blood sugar, salts, liver or kidney function, clotting, or the level of a particular medicine. Urine tests or a chest X-ray may occasionally be needed.

Many exposures do not require every possible test. A poison specialist can help determine which tests and observation period are appropriate for the substance involved.

Treatment and management

Treatment depends on the contents of the sachet, the route of exposure, symptoms, and test results. The first priority is supporting breathing and circulation while the substance is identified.

After swallowing a sachet's contents, do not make yourself or another person vomit. Vomiting can bring corrosive material back through the throat or allow detergent and other liquids to enter the lungs. Do not give food, drink, charcoal, or a home remedy unless a poison service or healthcare professional advises it.

For skin exposure, contaminated clothing should be removed and the skin rinsed with running water. For eye exposure, begin gentle rinsing with clean, lukewarm water and seek poison or medical advice. Contact lenses should be removed if they come out easily. Do not put other chemicals or "neutralising" solutions in the eye.

Hospital treatment may include oxygen, intravenous fluids, medicines for seizures or abnormal heart rhythms, and help with breathing. Pain, vomiting, chemical burns, and eye injuries can also be treated.

Activated charcoal can bind some swallowed poisons, but it does not work for every chemical and may be unsafe when someone is drowsy, vomiting, or at risk of inhaling material into the lungs. It should be used only when recommended by a poison specialist or healthcare team.

Some substances have specific antidotes. These may be used for certain pesticides, medicines, rodenticides, or metals. There is no single antidote for all sachet exposures.

People exposed to corrosive substances may need specialist assessment of the throat or digestive tract. Significant eye exposure may require an eye examination to look for injury to the cornea, the clear surface at the front of the eye.

Complications

Most minor exposures resolve without lasting harm, especially when the product is identified quickly and appropriate advice is followed. More concentrated or toxic products can cause complications.

Possible complications include chemical burns, damage to the eye surface, or aspiration pneumonitis. Aspiration pneumonitis is inflammation caused by a chemical entering the lungs. It may lead to coughing, low oxygen levels, or breathing difficulty.

Other complications depend on the ingredient. They can include seizures, abnormal heart rhythms, liver or kidney injury, delayed bleeding, airway swelling, or prolonged weakness.

Severe oxygen shortage or organ injury can have lasting effects, although these outcomes are not expected after every exposure.

The sachet wrapper itself may cause choking or, less often, blockage in the digestive tract.

Prevention

Many sachet exposures can be prevented. The most reliable approach is secure storage rather than relying on warnings, bitter tastes, or child-resistant packaging.

Keep medicines, detergents, pesticides, nicotine products, and household chemicals locked away and out of children's sight and reach. Return them to secure storage immediately after use.

Keep each sachet in its original labelled packaging. Do not store chemical packets beside food, sweets, or drink powders. Never transfer them into food containers, unmarked bags, or pockets where they could be mistaken for something safe.

Open one sachet only when it is needed, and follow the product label for handling and protective equipment. Dispose of damaged or leaking packets according to local hazardous-waste or product instructions.

Child-resistant packaging can slow a child down, but it is not childproof. Visitors' bags, handbags, work bags, and bedside tables can also contain medicine or nicotine packets.

If a person is at risk of intentional poisoning, safer storage and support from health or crisis services may help reduce access during a difficult period.

Living with it and what to expect

Sachet poisoning is usually an acute event rather than a long-term condition. For a low-risk exposure, symptoms may settle within hours or days. Some people need a period of observation even when they initially feel well because certain effects are delayed.

Recovery after a significant lung, eye, liver, kidney, or digestive injury may take longer. Follow-up can include breathing checks, an eye examination, wound care, or repeat blood tests. The need for follow-up is determined by the chemical and the injuries it caused.

A persistent cough after aspiration, ongoing trouble swallowing after a chemical burn, or continuing changes in vision may require specialist care. Delayed blood-clotting problems from some rodenticides may require repeated testing and treatment over a longer period.

An accidental exposure does not usually make someone more likely to be poisoned again.

Prevention focuses on changing storage and handling practices.

After an intentional exposure, physical recovery is only part of care. A mental health assessment and continuing support can help address the reasons for the poisoning and reduce the risk of another episode.

When to get medical help

Call emergency services now if someone has:

Move away from fumes if this can be done without entering a dangerous area. Do not enter a contaminated space without appropriate protection.

Contact a poison information service promptly for any uncertain exposure, even if there are no symptoms. This is especially important for children, unknown products, pesticides, rodenticides, nicotine, concentrated cleaners, or medicine sachets. Have the packet or label available when possible.

Arrange medical review if mild symptoms do not settle, or if coughing, vomiting, eye discomfort, skin pain, unusual bruising, or marked tiredness develops after the exposure.

Routine follow-up is appropriate when a healthcare team has requested repeat blood tests, an eye check, breathing assessment, or review of a healing chemical burn. New severe symptoms should be treated as urgent rather than waiting for a routine appointment.

- Trouble breathing, severe wheezing, or blue or grey lips
- Collapsed, stopped responding, or cannot be awakened normally
- A seizure
- Severe confusion, agitation, or weakness
- Difficulty swallowing, heavy drooling, or swelling around the mouth
- Severe eye pain, loss of vision, or a chemical burn
- Swallowed a substance intentionally or as an act of self-harm

Common questions

What should I do if my child ate something from a sachet?

Remove any remaining material from reach and check the child's mouth without putting your fingers deep inside it. Keep the packaging and contact a poison information service immediately. Do not make the child vomit or give food, drink, or charcoal unless specifically

advised. Call emergency services for breathing trouble, severe drowsiness, collapse, or a seizure.

Are silica-gel sachets poisonous?

Plain silica gel is generally considered to have low toxicity. The main concerns are choking, irritation, and uncertainty about what the packet contains. Some desiccant or oxygen-absorbing packets contain different substances. Check the label and contact a poison service if the product is unknown, a child swallowed it, or symptoms develop.

What happens if I swallow laundry detergent from a sachet?

Concentrated detergent may cause vomiting, coughing, throat irritation, drowsiness, or breathing problems. Eye splashes can cause significant irritation or injury. Do not induce vomiting. Contact a poison information service promptly, even if the amount seems small.

Can symptoms start hours after the exposure?

Yes. Some medicines, pesticides, rodenticides, and corrosive chemicals can cause delayed effects. Lung symptoms may also appear after material has been inhaled during coughing or vomiting. Follow the observation and testing advice given for the specific product.

Should I drink milk or water after swallowing the contents?

Not unless a poison service or healthcare professional recommends it for that product. Drinks may be unhelpful or unsafe with some chemicals, especially if the person is drowsy, vomiting, or having trouble swallowing.

Can sachet poisoning cause permanent damage?

Most minor exposures do not cause permanent harm. Lasting problems are possible after severe chemical burns, eye injuries, oxygen shortage, aspiration into the lungs, or major organ damage. The risk is determined by the substance and the severity of the exposure.

Sources

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