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Elephant ear poisoning

Elephant ear plants are indoor or outdoor plants with very large, arrow-shaped leaves. Poisoning may occur if you eat parts of this plant.

This article is for information only. DO NOT use it to treat or manage an actual poison exposure. If you or someone you are with has an exposure, call your local emergency number (such as 911), or your local poison control center can be reached directly by calling the national toll-free Poison Help hotline (1-800-222-1222) from anywhere in the United States.

Poisonous Ingredient

The harmful substances in elephant ear plants are:

- Oxalic acid
- Asparagine, an amino acid found in this plant

Note: Leaves and stems are the most dangerous when eaten in large amounts.

Where Found

Elephant ear grows naturally in tropical and subtropical areas. It is also common in northern climates.

Symptoms

Symptoms of elephant ear poisoning are:

- Blisters in the mouth
- Burning in mouth and throat
- Increased saliva production
- Pain when swallowing
- Hoarse voice
- Diarrhea
- Nausea and vomiting
- Redness, pain, and burning of the eyes
- Swelling of the tongue, mouth, and eyes

Blistering and swelling in the mouth may be severe enough to prevent normal speaking and swallowing.

Home Care

Wipe out the mouth with a cold, wet cloth. Wash off any plant sap on the skin. Rinse out the eyes.

Do not make the person throw up unless poison control or a health care provider tells you to.

Before Calling Emergency

Have this information ready:

- Person's age, weight, and condition
- Part of plant swallowed, if known
- Time swallowed
- Amount swallowed

Poison Control

Your local poison control center can be reached directly by calling the national toll-free Poison Help hotline (1-800-222-1222) from anywhere in the United States. This national hotline will let you talk to experts in poisoning. They will give you further instructions.

This is a free and confidential service. All local poison control centers in the United States use this national number. You should call if you have any questions about poisoning or poison prevention. It does NOT need to be an emergency. You can call for any reason, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

What to Expect at the Emergency Room

Take the plant with you to the hospital, if possible.

The provider will measure and monitor the person's vital signs, including temperature, pulse, breathing rate, and blood pressure. Symptoms will be treated as appropriate. The person may receive fluids through a vein (IV) and breathing support. Corneal damage will require additional treatment, possibly from an eye specialist.

Outlook (Prognosis)

If contact with the person's mouth is not severe, symptoms usually resolve within a few days. For people who do have severe contact with the plant, a longer recovery time may be necessary.

In rare cases, oxalic acid causes swelling severe enough to block the airways.

Do not touch or eat any plant that you are not familiar with. Wash your hands thoroughly after working in the garden or walking in the woods.

References

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Review Date 11/2/2023

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Health Content
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06/01/2028

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