What's your poison?
Mistakes can be deadly

What do Socrates, Alexander the Great, Charles Darwin, Cleopatra, Mozart and American blues musician Robert Johnson have in common? If history is correct, all of them died not of old age or illness, but of poisoning.

What exactly is a poison? According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, it’s any substance that can be harmful if used incorrectly, by the wrong person or in the wrong amount. What’s more, poison can enter the body many ways, including orally or by injection, coming into contact with the skin or being breathed in.1

When we think of poisonings, we often think of children. After all, much is written about the dangers household cleaners and chemicals pose to infants and toddlers. But adults are susceptible to poisoning too. Theoretically, they should be wiser than kids – after all, they can read labels – but mistakes happen. According to ABC News:2

- A 29-year-old woman mistook liquid glue for eye drops. Her eyes were sealed shut for eight hours before doctors could open them.
- 70 people became ill, some seriously, after drinking “apple juice” that was actually Tiki-lamp oil.
- An infant died after an adult mixed baby formula with arsenic-laden weed killer that was mistaken for spring water.
- A bar patron is on a permanent feeding tube after her drink was accidentally laced with lye instead of juice.

Poison frequency and prevention

How common is poisoning in our nation? The American Association of Poison Control Centers’ 56 locations received more than 3 million calls in 2010. About 2.2 million were about exposures ranging from carbon monoxide to snake bites to food poisoning, and the remainder were requests for information. What’s more, while questions about poison exposure in children under age 6 were the subject of about half of the calls, adults accounted for 92 percent of all of reported poison-related deaths.3

If you or someone you know has been exposed to poison, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services recommends calling the Poison Control Center’s toll-free hotline at 1-800-222-1222. The organization also recommends:

- Getting to fresh air right away if the poison was inhaled.
- Rinsing the exposed area with running water for 15-20 minutes if the poison is on the skin or in the eyes.
- Staying calm, because not all medicines, chemicals and household products are poison, and not all contact is dangerous.
Make sure you’re covered

While major medical insurance may cover many of the bills stemming from a poisoning incident, it’s wise to make sure you have insurance in place that helps protect against the costs major medical plans don’t cover. These include co-payments and deductibles, as well as the household bills that continue to roll in during hospitalization and recovery. One tool to consider is hospital confinement indemnity insurance, which helps pay out-of-pocket benefits associated with a covered hospital stay.

Finally, make sure you’re prepared for the unexpected by programming the Poison Help line, 1-800-222-1222—which connects you to your local poison center—into your cell and home phones so you have it on hand if it’s needed.