

Alert on herbal medicine poisoning

The Department of Health (DH) has recently received notification of a confirmed case of aconitum alkaloid poisoning from the Hospital Authority (HA). Based on recommendation by a friend and without consulting a Chinese medicine practitioner (CMP), the affected male patient purchased processed *Radix Aconiti Lateralis* on the internet via his family member, to make a soup. The processed *Radix Aconiti Lateralis* was not separately decocted prior to boiling with other ingredients of the soup. The patient developed oral numbness, dizziness, nausea, weakness, abdominal pain and shortness of breath after consumption of the soup. He was admitted to a public hospital for treatment and subsequently discharged. Laboratory results from HA showed aconitum alkaloids in his urine. The suspected contributing factors for this poisoning event include consumption of Chinese medicines without instruction from CMP, overdosage and improper decoction.

Processed *Radix Aconiti Lateralis* is listed in Schedule 2 of the Chinese Medicine Ordinance (Cap. 549). It is commonly used for pain relief, but contains aconitum alkaloids. If used improperly, aconitum alkaloids can cause perioral and limb numbness, dizziness, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, weak pulses and shortness of breath. It can be fatal in severe cases. Pre-decoction and prolonged decoction are essential to reduce its toxicity before consumption.

DH reminds members of the public to consult a CMP before taking Chinese medicines, and to follow their instructions on decoction and consumption regime. The public should not self-prescribe Chinese medicines, nor be credulous about formulae told by others. Chinese medicines should be purchased from licensed Chinese herbal medicine retailers to minimise the risk of acquiring herbal medicines that are improperly processed. Medical advice should be sought if there is any discomfort after consumption.

Members of the public may visit the website of Chinese Medicine Regulatory Office of DH (https://www.cmro.gov.hk/html/eng/useful_information/public_health/index.html) for information about safe use of Chinese medicines.

Chinese Medicine Regulatory Office
Department of Health
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