

Alert on herbal medicine poisoning

The Department of Health (DH) has recently received notification from the Hospital Authority (HA) of a case of poisoning related to the consumption of soup containing Radix Gentianae mixed with Radix et Rhizoma Veratri. According to the information gathered, the case involves two patients from the same household. The two patients, without consulting a Chinese medicine practitioner (CMP), purchased Chinese herbal medicines (Chm) claimed to be Radix et Rhizoma Veratri from the internet, and then self-processed the Chm for consumption. The two patients developed symptoms including dizziness, vomiting, hypotension and bradycardia after consumption of the Chm. They were admitted to a public hospital for treatment and were subsequently discharged. Laboratory results from HA revealed that both urine samples of both patients and the sample of herbs contained Veratrum alkaloids. Examination performed by the DH identified that the Chm sample contained Radix et Rhizoma Veratri. It was suspected that this poisoning event was related to the purchase and consumption of adulterated Chm, without following the instruction from a CMP.

Radix et Rhizoma Veratri is a Chm in Schedule 2 of the Chinese Medicine Ordinance (Cap. 549), which could be used in treatment of epilepsy and certain skin conditions. It contains toxic alkaloids including jervine and protoveratrine, etc. Improper use could lead to chest pain, palpitation, hypotension, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, difficulty in breathing, etc. In severe cases, affected patient may have disturbance in consciousness or even respiratory arrest.

DH reminds members of the public to consult a CMP before taking Chinese medicines, and to follow their instructions on preparation and consumption. One should not self-prescribe Chinese medicines, nor be credulous about formulae told by others. Members of the public should also purchase Chm from licensed Chm retailers to minimise the risk of acquiring herbal medicines that may be adulterated. Medical advice should be sought as soon as possible 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 more information about safe use of Chinese medicines.

Chinese Medicine Regulatory Office
Department of Health
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