

Alert on herbal medicine poisoning

The Department of Health (DH) has recently received notification of a case of aconitum alkaloids poisoning from the Hospital Authority (HA). According to the information gathered, the affected patient consumed soup prepared by her friend, without consulting a Chinese medicine practitioner (CMP), which processed Radix Aconiti Lateralis was included in the soup. The patient developed tongue and perioral numbness, generalised weakness and diarrhoea after consumption of the soup. She was admitted to a public hospital for treatment and was subsequently discharged. Laboratory results from HA showed aconitum alkaloids in her urine. The suspected contributing factors for this poisoning event include consumption of Chinese herbal medicine (Chm) without instruction from CMP 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. 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 information about safe use of Chinese medicines.

Chinese Medicine Regulatory Office
Department of Health
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