

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). Without Chinese medicine practitioner (CMP)'s consultation, the patient purchased Chinese medicines according to the herbal formula provided by a relative in a licensed Chinese herbal medicines (Chm) retailer and consumed the herbal broth. The patient developed symptoms including tongue and limbs numbness, dizziness, vomiting and diarrhoea after consumption of the Chm. Then the patient was admitted to a public hospital for treatment and was subsequently discharged. Laboratory results from HA showed aconitum alkaloids in the patient's urine and herbal remnant samples. Field investigation did not identify gross contamination of related Chinese medicines with aconitum alkaloid. The suspected contributing factors for this poisoning event are consumption of overdosed Chm without instruction of CMP and inadequate decoction of processed *Radix Aconiti Lateralis*.

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 limbs numbness, dizziness, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, weak pulses and shortness of breath. It can be fatal in severe case. Therefore, prolonged decoction to reduce its toxicity is required before oral consumption.

DH urged members of the public not to self-prescribe Chinese medicines. Those who are feeling unwell should consult Chinese medicine practitioner and take Chinese medicines according to the instruction. Medical advice should be sought if there is any discomfort after consumption.

Members of the public may visit the website of Chinese Medicine Division of DH (http://www.cmd.gov.hk/html/eng/health_info/pamphlet.html) for information about safe use of Chinese medicines.

Chinese Medicine Division
Department of Health
13 June 2016