

Alert on herbal medicine poisoning

The Department of Health (DH) received notification of a confirmed case of aconitum alkaloid poisoning from the Hospital Authority (HA) in March 2017. The patient self-prescribed and prepared the decoction himself. The herbs were purchased via an online platform. He developed symptoms including dizziness, perioral numbness and loss of consciousness after consumption of the herbal broth. The patient was admitted to a public hospital for treatment and was discharged later. Laboratory results from HA revealed that there was aconitum alkaloids in the patient's urine sample. DH examined the unused sample of processed Radix Aconiti Lateralis and processed Radix Aconiti Kusnezoffii bought by the patient and found that the former was unprocessed Radix Aconiti Lateralis whereas the latter was suspected to be unprocessed Radix Aconiti Kusnezoffii. The suspected contributing factor for this poisoning event is the improper use of unprocessed Radix Aconiti Lateralis and Radix Aconiti Kusnezoffii.

Unprocessed Radix Aconiti Lateralis and Radix Aconiti Kusnezoffii are listed in the Schedule 1 of the Chinese Medicine Ordinance (Cap 549), which contain aconitum alkaloids and are commonly used for pain relief. It is usually for external application instead of oral intake. 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.

Members of the public are advised not to self-prescribe Chinese medicines. Besides, purchasing Chinese medicines from licensed retailers ensures that the herbal medicines come from reputable suppliers. Members of the public who are feeling unwell should consult Chinese medicine practitioner before taking Chinese medicines. 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
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