

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). The patient consulted a Chinese medicine practitioner (CMP) and was prescribed with overdose of processed Radix Aconiti and processed Radix Aconiti Kusnezoffii. Afterwards, the patient self-prescribed and prepared the Chinese herbal medicines (Chm) without consultation. Symptoms compatible with aconitum alkaloid poisoning developed 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 sample. The suspected contributing factors for this poisoning event are inappropriate self-prescription, consumption with overdose of processed Radix Aconiti and processed Radix Aconiti Kusnezoffii and inappropriate preparation of Chm.

Processed Radix Aconiti and processed Radix Aconiti Kusnezoffii are listed in Schedule 2 of the Chinese Medicine Ordinance (Cap.549). They are commonly used for pain relief, but contain 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 advises CMPs to make reference to relevant recommendations on usage and dosage when they prescribe Chm. Their doses, combination and decoction should be tailored to patients' clinical status and based on relevant literatures. Members of the public are also advised to follow CMP's instructions in the preparation and consumption of Chm and not to obtain Chinese medicines without consultation. They should seek medical advice as soon as possible if there is any discomfort after taking Chm.

DH has referred this case to the Chinese Medicine Council of Hong Kong to follow up whether there is inappropriate practice of the CMP.

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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