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Syrup of ipecac: still alive and well

Five years ago in this space, Yours Truly predicted the imminent demise of syrup of ipecac, not only for over-the-counter use but for prescription use as well. In my opinion, ipecac was all but dead and buried. But guess what? You can still buy this highly dangerous drug over-the-counter, without a prescription. Let’s return to 1965, the year I graduated from medical school, for the rest of the story.

In 1965, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) approved syrup of ipecac for over-the-counter (OTC) use. Why? Because the FDA believed taking a dose of ipecac offered a safe and effective way to induce vomiting after a child had ingested one of a long list of toxic substances or overdosed on a drug. (The list of toxic substances included kerosene, turpentine, ammonia, gasoline, car polish, lye, draino, benzene, furniture polish, bleach, insect spray, cleaning fluid and certain strong acids.) The FDA also believed that having a bottle handy might save parents a trip to the hospital emergency room.

By 1985, ipecac had become so entrenched in treating childhood poisoning that the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommended all pediatricians routinely discuss ipecac and give it to parents for home use at their child’s six-month checkup.

Even Dr. Benjamin Spock jumped on the bandwagon with this advice: “When childproofing your home, place the phone number of the nearest poison control center right next to your phone. Always keep on hand a one-ounce bottle of syrup of ipecac for each child in the family. If you suspect your child has ingested a potentially toxic substance, you should do the following: Be prepared to administer syrup of ipecac, but do not use it unless instructed to do so by the poison control center, a doctor or a nurse. Approximately 20 minutes after taking the ipecac, your child will begin to vomit.”

For the past 20 years, however, evidence has been mounting that ipecac isn’t all it was touted to be. For instance, numerous children have aspirated those toxic substances listed above following ipecac-induced vomiting, causing damage to their lungs and their esophagus. Moreover, more and more adolescents and young adults who suffer from
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Various eating disorders have abused syrup of ipecac to induce vomiting to keep their weight down. Chronic abuse in this manner has resulted in progressive heart damage and even death. Karen Carpenter’s tragic death comes to mind. As a result, emergency room doctors have completely stopped using syrup of ipecac to treat potential poisonings.

Five years ago, shortly before I pronounced ipecac dead and ready for burial, an advisory committee of experts recommended that the FDA return ipecac to its pre-1965 status as a prescription-only drug. And, a recently completed study had shown that the home use of ipecac did not save parents a trip to the hospital and did not save lives. All of this evidence made my prediction seem fairly safe, at the time. So what happened?

The FDA has still not acted on its own advisory committee’s recommendation – made some five years ago - to revoke ipecac’s OTC status and to reclassify it as a prescription-only drug.

Dr. Tomas J. Silber, Professor of Pediatrics and Director of the Eating Disorders Program at George Washington University summarizes the ipecac situation this way: “Ipecac has outlived its clinical indications and has become a substance of abuse – a bulimic’s drug – and it continues to cause serious morbidity and mortality. For all these reasons, pediatricians and many others involved in the care of patients with eating disorders continue to strongly urge the FDA to remove ipecac from its current OTC status.”

A further thought: Syrup of ipecac may be the most dangerous OTC drug of all. However, it is difficult to estimate the harm caused by ipecac abuse among patients with eating disorders since they use it secretly. But there is enough information among patients seen in eating disorder programs to know that the number of teenagers and young adults (mainly girls) who are experimenting with ipecac may be astonishing!

Mercifully, if ipecac use stops, the heart injury it can cause may be reversible, according to Dr. Silber. Thus, if ipecac is no longer available OTC, this may allow recovery from the damage caused by its sustained use and prevent further heart injury and even death.

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