

The Weekend West

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KIDS POISONED

Young children exposed to drugs and pills in their homes

EXCLUSIVE

■ **Cathy O'Leary**
Medical Editor

Hundreds of WA children suffered potentially lethal poisonings last year from substances including sleeping pills, rat killer, marijuana cookies and body-building pills.

Experts are worried young children are being exposed to a

widening range of prescription, over-the-counter and illicit drugs in their homes.

In one case, a 14-month-old toddler was left with serious caustic injury after swallowing button batteries and a two-year-old boy took a potentially fatal dose of his mother's methadone syrup.

Other serious cases involved a two-year-old boy with toxic levels of iron after swallowing

his mother's iron tablets and a three-year-old found confused and agitated after taking anti-psychotic medication.

They are some of the 7646 calls made to the WA Poisons Information Centre involving children accidentally swallowing or overdosing on substances, including 15 newborns under five weeks old.

The Weekend West has obtained detailed information

showing poisoning scares involving dozens of substances ranging from arsenic and strychnine to herbal tablets and supermarket-bought pain-killers.

Not all resulted in significant illness but poisonings ranging from mild to severe were flagged in more than 1400 children.

The centre said that while most cases involved limited exposure such as a child licking

a low-toxicity product like a hand cream or nappy paste, many cases involved highly toxic chemicals and potent pharmaceuticals.

Swallowing a few millilitres of liquid or a single tablet was a potentially lethal dose for a toddler.

It included medication such as narcotic analgesics, drugs of

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Children poisoned

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abuse, drugs used to treat heart problems and high blood pressure, as well as medications to manage diabetes and serious psychiatric conditions.

More than 780 calls were related to paracetamol products such as Panadol and ibuprofen pills including Nurofen.

Separate figures from Kidsafe WA also reveal more than 500 childhood poisonings were treated at Princess Margaret Hospital's emergency department in 2013-14, with more than half involving pharmaceutical substances, many of them over-the-counter paracetamol.

Kidsafe chief executive Scott Phillips said the cases showed there were risks from everyday household products through to highly potent narcotics.

"Parents still tend to



Similar: Lollies and pills. Picture: Mogens Johansen

think of poisoning risk coming from bleaches and cleaning products but more and more we're seeing medications implicated," he said.

Parents juggling work and family life had become complacent about keeping medications out of reach of young children.

Many newer homes did not have an out-of-reach medicine cabinet with child-resistant locks.

Mr Phillips said consumer demand for easy-to-swallow pills meant increasingly medications were smaller, sweet-flavoured and looked like

lollies, which could confuse children.

He said the agency often used images of pills and lollies mixed up in a pile to show parents how similar they looked.

He urged parents never to refer to medicines or vitamins as lollies when trying to persuade children to take them.

In an emergency, when a child swallows a poison do not try to make them vomit. Phone the Poisons Information Centre on 13 11 26.

For general information, phone Kidsafe WA on 9340 8509 or the Child Safety Information Line on 1800 802 244.