

There have been recent questions regarding the toxicity of hand sanitizers. The concern is related to the amount of alcohol contained in these products, which can range from 60-65% depending on the product. This is equivalent to a 120 - 130 proof alcoholic beverage. While a child could become intoxicated by ingesting hand sanitizer, typically children will not drink enough directly from the container to cause problems. This is primarily due to its bad taste and irritation to the mouth. The poison center receives a large number of calls regarding ingestion of hand sanitizers by children each year. These cases typically result in no effect or at most minimal symptoms such as nausea, vomiting or oral irritation. The amount that would be licked from hands would normally not be enough to cause intoxication symptoms. There have been rare situations where a child has developed signs and symptoms of intoxication such as lethargy or difficulty walking, but recovered completely without serious effects. As an example, it would take a 2 year old weighing 25 pounds approximately 2 teaspoons or 10-20 pumps of an average container to become intoxicated (dizzy, slurred speech, unsteady gait, decreased blood sugar).

While some concern regarding toxicity in children is valid, hand sanitizers continue to play an important role in preventing the spread of illness and infection. Community-based epidemiologic studies have shown this benefit. Hand sanitizers were effective in reducing gastrointestinal illnesses in households, in curbing absentee rates in elementary schools, and in reducing illnesses in university dormitories. Plain soap and water use may be as effective in most situations also. Information about hand hygiene can be found on the Minnesota Department of Health website at <http://www.health.state.mn.us/handhygiene/index.html>

It is important to note that hand sanitizers should be kept out of the reach of children and their use in kids should be supervised. If ingestion does occur, contact the Minnesota Poison Control System at 1-800-222-1222.