

MEMORANDUM

DATE: June 9, 2022

TO: Healthcare providers
Coroners and Medical Examiners Local
Health Departments

FROM: IDPH Office of Health Promotion, Division of Emerging Health Issues

RE: Increase in dermatitis due to presumed poison hemlock plant exposures

The Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH) is notifying healthcare providers, hospitals, and local public health departments of an increase in plant-based exposures resulting in systemic skin lesions requiring medical consultation or attention.

- Often the specific plants are not identified or known by the person exposed.
- Mowing ditches, weeding, and outdoor occupations are common adult exposures.
- Other diagnoses have been considered prior to learning about plant exposure (e.g. Hand, Foot, and Mouth disease, Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever).
- Plant toxins can form blisters within hours.
- Poison Hemlock contains a toxin, conine. It can cause paralysis, seizures, autonomic instability, respiratory depression, coma, and possibly death, if ingested.
- After resolution of the blisters, dark, hyperpigmented streaks can remain for months.

Pictures of some of the most common plants that may cause this reaction are shown here:

https://extension.illinois.edu/sites/default/files/hogweed_and_lookalikes_2017.pdf; a June 2 Facebook posting from University of Illinois Extension also provides pictures of wild parsnip and poison hemlock:

<https://www.facebook.com/125749841792/posts/10158348761171793/?sfnsn=mo>.



This patient described shortness of breath, muscle weakness, cognitive difficulties, and “It feels like a chemical burn but does not go away.” Internal systems may be involved if plant material is ingested. DISTRIBUTION OF POISON CONTROL CENTER NOTIFICATIONS:

The Illinois Poison Control Center consultative calls for “poison hemlock exposures” increased substantially in May 2022, exceeding in one month (n = 17) the total of calls for this reason from 2020 (10 calls in calendar year) and 2021 (6 calls in calendar year).

This year,

- Patient age range: 2 years to 71 years of age (median = 32.5 years);
- 7 identified as male and 10 as female.
- Most exposures occurred at the individuals' residence. In two instances—one household, one occupational—a pair of individuals were exposed at the same time.
- Exposure can be intentional or unintentional.
- Since 2020, poisonous hemlock consultations have included residents of at least eighteen counties dispersed throughout the state.

Classification of the plants to which persons were exposed are highly likely to vary based on caller plant knowledge and information gathered from the exposed person.

EMERGENCY DEPARTMENT AND DEATH DATA:

Fortunately, no deaths attributed to hemlock were identified in recent vital records or through the Sudden Unexplained Overdose Reporting System (SUDORS) dataset. Few emergency department visits in the past year included 'hemlock' in the chief complaint or notes, though distinguishing between types of rash illnesses via such coding is challenging and likely to be missing some events where affected persons sought emergency department care.

ACTIONS:

Knowing that plant-based rash illness reports are increasing in Illinois:

Healthcare providers should:

- Consider plant-based exposures in the rule out of rash presentation of unknown origin.
- Evaluate plant exposures such as mowing, weeding, or occupational work around plants.
- Remove patient from the site of exposure; all thorns, stickers, prickles, and other foreign bodies should be removed. Wash exposed area thoroughly with soap and water
- Contaminated clothing should be washed before being worn again.
- Phytophotodermatitis can be treated with cold compresses and topical corticosteroids. Symptoms may subside in a few weeks.
- Provide educational materials to help identify plants to those who present with such rashes.
- Consider contact exposures with pets and use of shared outdoor equipment when identifying others who may be at risk of exposure.

Local health departments should:

- Consider seasonal educational outreach about noxious plants identified in their communities, particularly between April and June.
- Work with local cooperative extension offices on appropriate plant destruction/remediation needs.

Community members should:

- Learn how to identify rash-causing plants at their residence or worksite. Cooperative Extension may be able to help guide safe removal.
- Wear gloves, long pants, and long-sleeved shirts when working around unfamiliar outdoor plants.
- Wash hands with soap and water after removing gloves; wash clothing in hot water.
- If rash develops, share recent plant exposure history with healthcare provider.
- Consult your veterinarian if livestock or pets are exposed to the plants listed.

RESOURCES:

University of Illinois Cooperative Extension June 2 Facebook post on plant identification:

<https://www.facebook.com/125749841792/posts/10158348761171793/?sfnsn=mo> and June 12, 2021 blog <https://extension.illinois.edu/blogs/garden-scoop/2021-06-12-wild-carrot-family-full-harmful-plant>.

National Institutes of Occupational Safety and Health "Outdoor Workers and Poisonous Plant Exposures, <https://blogs.cdc.gov/niosh-science-blog/2022/05/04/poisonous-plants/>