

# Products that resemble foods and appeal to children

## Potential risks of accidental ingestion



**Some consumer products - namely cosmetics, personal care and household products - are presented to consumers in ways that make them imitate food or appeal to children.** This is for instance the case of certain shower gels, shampoos, body lotions, soaps, liquid soaps and dishwashing liquids.

It is reasonable to expect that the closer a product resembles food and the more attractive it is to children, the more likely it is to be confused with food and swallowed?

### → WHAT MAKES SOME PRODUCTS MORE LIKELY TO BE MISTAKEN FOR FOOD?

**Visually**, some products are especially made to look like a fruit or drink, or simply have similar colours as food products. Others display pictures of food items or names and written descriptions imitating real foods.

If such products are sold or stored near real foodstuffs they can more readily be mistaken for such.

Pleasant **fruity smells and tastes** of non-food products can also cause confusion.

**Young children** tend to be drawn to anything within their reach, but particularly by products with colourful patterns, bearing a familiar character, or that smell nice. Warning labels have no effect on them since they cannot read and a skull symbol may even make a product more attractive to them.

### → HOW COMMON AND SERIOUS ARE POISONINGS?

The safety measures introduced in the last 30 years have brought down the number of poisonings from household products and, today, serious cases are very unusual. Two of the most successful safety measures are the use of child resistant packaging and the substitution of harmful substances by other, less toxic ones. Education campaigns and laws to prevent storage of poisonous substances in food containers have also been effective.

At present, only few people who happen to swallow cosmetics and household products seek medical help. And among the reported cases, few show serious symptoms. In general, there is little risk of serious health problems when personal care products are swallowed, and higher risk with household cleaning products, because of the more aggressive ingredients.

The most common reported symptoms are gastrointestinal (vomiting, abdominal pain) or neurological (drowsiness, impaired consciousness, low muscle tone, seizures, and problems with movement, balance or speech, seizure).

### WHO RUNS THE GREATEST RISK?

Children under the age of 3 and the elderly are particularly prone to accidental poisoning.

The risk of accidents may be greater when children are not closely supervised or when the adults looking after them are distracted by other activities such as cooking. Children

may drink from any open container within their reach, particularly if the smell is nice. Many poisoning cases are related to corrosive solutions that are stored in unlabelled containers and unknowingly given to children.

When elderly people have reduced sight and senses of taste and smell, they cannot easily distinguish edible products from others, particularly if they are disoriented because of illness or medication.

### → SUBSTANCES WITH HARMFUL EFFECTS

Household products frequently involved in accidental poisonings are detergents, cleaners and bleaches.

Their most harmful ingredients are **corrosive substances**, such as acids and bases present in bleach or oven and drain cleaners, which can cause severe burns in the oesophagus or the stomach.

Other potentially harmful ingredients include:

- **Surfactants** (e.g. added to detergents and soaps to remove dirt and stains),
- **Alcohols and glycols** (e.g. used in anti-freeze and windscreenwash),
- **Essential oils** (e.g. pine oil, wintergreen oil and camphor).

This fact sheet is based on the scientific opinion "Opinion on the potential health risks posed by chemical consumer products resembling food and/or having child-appealing properties", an opinion adopted on 22 March 2011 by the independent European Scientific Committee on Consumer Safety.

The detailed and nuanced view of the European Scientific Committee on Consumer Safety on this issue is available at: [http://ec.europa.eu/health/scientific\\_committees/consumer\\_safety/docs/sccs\\_o\\_056.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/health/scientific_committees/consumer_safety/docs/sccs_o_056.pdf)

