Dr Md Rajib Hossain

The recent incidence of Paracetamol poisoning in Bangladesh and its fatal consequences have alarmed us once again about drug safety for the children. Similar incidence that occurred few decades ago claimed thousands of infants' life.

Repeated death due to Paracetamol adulterated with diethylene glycol, a toxic chemical usually used in plastic, rubber, textile and leather dying industries shows lack of vigilance and negligence over the safety of over-the-counter medications by Drug Administration. Not only the adulterated Paracetamols, but also other over-the-counter drugs (nonprescription medicine) pose a high risk, especially for the children as their excretory system is not that much matured and capable.

A recent study from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has found that more than twice as many children are accidentally poisoned with prescription and over-the-counter medicines as with household consumer products.

Most of the affected children ingested medicine without their parents' knowledge, but 8 percent of emergency room visits and 14 percent of hospitalisations were the result of parents' accidentally overdosing their offspring. More than 75 percent of the medication overdoses were in children under 5.

Medicine purchased for children without a prescription, often contain the same ingredients as prescription medicine and can pose serious safety risks due to overdose. Give infants and children only medication specifically formulated for their age and weight. Do not cut adult tablets in half or estimate a child's dose of an adult-strength liquid product. If you have any questions about a nonprescription medicine for your child, ask a paediatrician for proper advice.

More than half of all accidental poisonings occur in children aged between one and five. Medicine are among the risks found in every household. We should avoid the following things in order to keep the children safe from medication poisoning.

* Avoid taking medications in front of your children, who often try to imitate adults

* Keep all medications (both prescription and nonprescription) in their original, child-resistant containers

* Check medications for expiration dates. If a product is not dated, discard it a year or less after purchase

* Avoid discarding medications in open trash containers in the kitchen or bathroom where children could get to them

If your baby ingests medication accidentally or unintentionally being given overdose, try to obtain a complete and reliable history before you take the baby into a hospital.

* If the substance was ingested (swallowed), inhaled, splashed into the eyes or absorbed through the skin

* How much of the potential poison was involved? When unsure of the exact amount, over-estimate the amount for safety reason. For example, if you are unsure how many pills remained in the bottle assume that the child ingested the full number that were prescribed.

* Any treatment that has already been given

* Save all original containers or bottles as they contain a list of ingredients included in the medication or product in question

Before you reach a hospital you can give the following first aid care for your children.

Inhaled poison
Get the child to fresh air immediately. Allow fresh air by opening doors and windows. If the child is not breathing, s/he needs immediate artificial respiration.

Poisons on the skin
Remove all clothing that is contaminated and begin to flood the skin with water for ten full minutes. Wash gently with soap and water and rinse the skin well.

Poisons in the eye
Flood the eye with water poured from a large glass or pitcher held about two to three inches from the eye. Continue to do this for 15 minutes and ask the child to blink as much as possible to assist in irrigating the eye. Do not attempt to force the eyelids open.

Ingested or swallowed poisons
If a child has ingested a medication or potentially poisonous substance do not give anything by mouth until you have been instructed to do so. Some substances when ingested result in irritation and burning to the mouth, throat, and digestive tract. By forcing a child who has ingested a corrosive substance to vomit you can cause further damage.

Protecting children from the toxic exposure of drugs, chemicals, and other potential household hazards is an important role for parents. Poison prevention begins by educating parents, grandparents, and others who are entrusted with the care of our children about what types of substances can be harmful to children. With a little precaution we can prevent such accidental poisoning.