

The 7th Conference on Health Care of the Chinese in North America

Chinese Patent Medicine as a Potential Source of Mercury Poisoning

Elaine Kang-Yum, R.Ph. and Stanley H. Oransky, MD, Hudson Valley Poison Control Center, Nyack, NY



Abstract

This research is an effort to create an awareness of the potential hazards of some Chinese patent medicines which contain mercurial ingredients. This should be of consideration when screening symptomatic patients who are of Asian ethnic background or other users of these medicines. This research discusses reported cases of mercury poisoning related to the use of Chinese patent medicines and the potential toxicity of cinnabar (red mercuric sulfide) and calomel (mercurous chloride), 2 mercurials commonly used in these medicines. A list of mercurial-containing Chinese patent medicines available on the open market in North America has been compiled, together with their traditional uses and mercurial contents and is presented as a quick references for specialists in Poison Information. This class of medicine may not pose a problem when used appropriately; however, its misuse, abuse, overdosage and improper storage can lead to serious mercury poisoning.