

RICIN FACT SHEET

What is ricin?

Ricin is a poison (toxin) that is easily made from beans of the castor plant. Castor beans are found all over the world and are used to make castor oil. Ricin is part of the left over “mash” when the beans are processed. However, it is a dangerous substance and can be fatal when used improperly.

How do you get it?

Ricin can come in several forms: powder, mist, pellets or dissolved in water. A person can be exposed by breathing the powder or mist, or by swallowing contaminated water or food. The liquid form can also be injected directly in the body. Accidental exposure to ricin is highly unlikely. It would take a deliberate act to make ricin and use it to poison someone.

What are the symptoms?

The major symptoms of ricin poisoning depend on the way a person is exposed and the amount (dose) received. If ricin is inhaled, the most likely symptoms would be difficulty breathing, fever, coughing, nausea and tightness in the chest. Fluid would begin to collect in the lungs, most likely leading to respiratory failure and death. If someone swallows ricin symptoms would be severe vomiting and diarrhea, followed by severe dehydration and low blood pressure. Other symptoms might be hallucinations and seizures. The liver, spleen and kidneys may fail (stop working) and death could occur. If the skin or eyes are exposed to ricin powder or mist, redness and pain can occur.

How soon do exposed people get sick?

Symptoms can develop rapidly depending on the type and amount of the exposure. Serious illness or death can occur within 36 to 72 hours. If death has not occurred in 3 to 5 days, the person will usually recover.

What should I do if I think I have been exposed to ricin?

There is no antidote to ricin. If you think you have been exposed to ricin you should go immediately to a hospital emergency room. The ricin should be removed off of or out of the body as soon as possible. Ricin poisoning is treated by giving the person supportive medical care to minimize the effects of the poisoning. If a release of ricin occurs indoors, the first thing to do is to get out of the building. If the release occurs outdoors, people should move away from the area. In an intentional release of ricin, emergency responders will likely be present and will assist exposed people with decontamination procedures, such as removing clothing, washing skin and transporting to the hospital if necessary.

Where can I get more information on ricin?

www.cdc.gov

www.dshs.state.tx.us

Source of information:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

<http://www.hcphe.org>

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