

# Preventive Health and Health Services Block Grant

## SUCCESS STORY 2018

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### EMS Poison Control System

#### Benzocaine Teething Ointment Poses Dangers

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**Public Health Issue:** Topical benzocaine is a local anesthetic (pain medication) commonly used to relieve pain caused by teething, periodontal irritation, burns, wounds, and insect bites. It is a gel that is applied to the painful areas of the mouth or lips. Pediatric exposure to these products may result in a condition called methemoglobinemia, in which the body is unable to deliver oxygen to the organs. This complication has been described in previous isolated reports, but not studied on a large scale across a statewide population.

**Intervention:** California Poison Control System (CPCS) researchers designed a study to assess the epidemiology and outcomes of teething gel poisoning in the cases reported to the statewide hotline. This research project was approved by the Institutional Review Board and the internal Research Committee of the CPCS and a research article was published in 2017.

Although the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) had previously released warnings about these products to warn consumers, this research showed that these exposures were still occurring (1). This issue was a public health concern that needed stronger policies at the federal level to curtail future exposures to these teething gels in young children.

A few months later, a consumer advocacy agency, the Public Citizen's Health Research Group, lobbied the FDA to act on the findings from this study and other similar reports.

**Impact:** In May 2018, based on the research conducted using data acquired by the hotline, and as a result of the Public Citizen's Health Research Group, the FDA took a bold and decisive action to curb the exposures to these agents (2). The FDA announcement recommended that over the counter oral health products containing the pain reliever benzocaine for the temporary relief of sore gums due to teething in infants or children should no longer be marketed and asked companies to stop selling these products for such use. If companies do not comply, the FDA will initiate a regulatory action to remove these products from the market. Also, the FDA is requesting that companies add new warnings to all other benzocaine oral health products to describe certain serious risks.

#### Footnotes:

1. Vohra R, Huntington S, Koike J, Le K, Geller RJ. Pediatric Exposures to Topical Benzocaine Preparations Reported to a Statewide Poison Control System. *West J Emerg Med.* 2017 Aug;18(5):923-927. PubMed Central PMCID: PMC5576629.

2. FDA News Release: FDA takes action against the use of OTC benzocaine teething products due to serious safety risk, lack of benefit. May 2018.  
<https://www.fda.gov/newsevents/newsroom/pressannouncements/ucm608325.htm>