

# GUIDELINES FOR ESTABLISHING A POISON CENTRE





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Guidelines for establishing a poison centre

This publication is the update of the Guidelines published in 1997 entitled "Guidelines for poison control".

ISBN 978-92-4-000952-3 (electronic version)

ISBN 978-92-4-000953-0 (print version)

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**Cataloguing-in-Publication (CIP) data.** CIP data are available at <http://apps.who.int/iris>.

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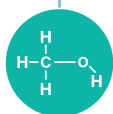
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# PREFACE

This publication is an update of the *Guidelines for poison control*, published by WHO in 1997 under the auspices of the International Programme on Chemical Safety. The stimulus for the original publication was recognition that poisoning by chemicals was a significant and growing risk in all countries but that relatively few countries had well-established facilities for the prevention and management of poisoning (1). The need to strengthen such capacity in countries, particularly through establishment of poisons information centres, was highlighted at a joint meeting of the World Federation of Associations of Clinical Toxicology Centres and Poison Control Centres, the International Programme on Chemical Safety and the European Commission held at WHO headquarters in October 1985. One of the outcomes of that meeting was a recommendation for preparation of guidance for countries on establishing or strengthening capacity for the prevention and management of poisoning. An international working group was convened to prepare such guidance.

The publication *Guidelines for poison control* was part of a larger WHO project, the INTOX programme, to support countries in establishing and strengthening poison centres. The INTOX programme included a project to evaluate antidotes and other substances used in the treatment of poisoning, development of a multilingual information package and data management system to help new poison centres get started and establishment of a global network of medical and analytical toxicologists and poison centre specialists.

In the years since the *Guidelines for poison control* were published, there have been developments in the roles and activities of poison centres and also in information technology (IT) and communication. Of particular importance is a renewed emphasis on the role of poison centres in public health after revision of the International Health Regulations in 2005 (IHR). The Regulations now take an all-hazards approach to protecting public health and require that countries have the capacity for surveillance, detection and response to public health events caused by chemicals. Much of this capacity can be provided by a well-resourced poison centre.

This update of the *Guidelines for poison control*, entitled *Guidelines for establishing a poison centre*, reflects the development of the role of poison centres in public health and the sound management of chemicals, described in section 1, and the opportunities provided by new technology. Assessments carried out under the IHR show continuing gaps in capacity for managing chemicals (2). In particular, many countries still lack access to poison centre services (3). There is therefore demand for updated guidance.

The update was prepared as follows. In May 2018, WHO convened a group of specialists in poison centres and medical and analytical toxicology from all the WHO regions. The group was asked to examine the *Guidelines for poison control* to identify where updates were needed and any additional information that should be included. The WHO Collaborating Centre for the Public Health Management of Chemical Exposures, part of Public Health England, commissioned the National Poisons Information Service (NPIS) units in Birmingham, Cardiff, Edinburgh and Newcastle to update individual sections and annexes. Personnel from the WHO Collaborating Centre made additional contributions, and the Team Leader at the Surveillance Coordination Unit in the Chemical Emergency Management and Toxicovigilance Division, Health Canada, provided significant material for section 5.

Each updated section was reviewed by members of the WHO expert group, who made further revisions. The complete document was reviewed at a meeting of the expert group on 9–10 July 2019, hosted by the NPIS (Edinburgh Unit) in Edinburgh, Scotland. After further revision, the document was reviewed at a small editorial group meeting on 4–5 December 2019, hosted by Public Health England in London. That revision was circulated to the WHO expert group and also to environmental health focal points in the WHO regional offices for comments.

The first section describes the history of poison centres and the policy background. It then provides an overview of the services that may be offered by a poison centre and the considerations to be taken into account in planning a poison centre. Subsequent sections address the more practical aspects of poison centre services and operations. Sections 2–4 give guidance on setting up a poisons information service, a clinical toxicology service and an analytical toxicology service. Section 5 describes the role of poison centres in toxicovigilance and the prevention of poisoning, and section 6 outlines their role in preparedness and response to chemical incidents. Section 7 presents issues in improving the availability of antidotes. Sections 8 and 9 present databases and reference sources for poison centres. Section 10 gives practical guidance on the training of poison centre staff and quality management. Section 11 discusses potential funding sources for poison centres, as experienced in various countries.

## REFERENCES

1. Report of the survey of poison control centres and related toxicological services 1984–1986. *J Toxicol Clin Exp.* 1988;8(5):313–71.
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3. Global Health Observatory (GHO) data: Poison centres: World directory of poison centres. Geneva: World Health Organization; 2020 ([https://www.who.int/gho/phe/chemical\\_safety/poisons\\_centres/en/](https://www.who.int/gho/phe/chemical_safety/poisons_centres/en/), accessed 7 April 2020).

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

WHO acknowledges the assistance of the WHO Collaborating Centre for the Public Health Management of Chemical Exposures, represented by the Centre for Radiation, Chemical and Environmental Hazards in Public Health England, and the National Poisons Information Service, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland in preparing this update to *Guidelines for poison control*.

WHO acknowledges the in-kind contribution of Public Health England (PHE) for the revision of this document. PHE participation was facilitated through the PHE International Health Regulations (IHR) Strengthening project, a UK aid-funded initiative supporting capacity building for IHR (2005) compliance. WHO also acknowledges the financial contribution of the European Commission for editing and translation.

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