

Tide Pod 'Challenge:' Web Fad Brings Big Dangers

By Dennis Thompson

HealthDay Reporter

THURSDAY, Jan. 18, 2018 (HealthDay News) -- You've gotta be kidding me. That's gotta be fake.

That's the understandable first reaction of many to the viral phenomenon dubbed the "Tide Pod Challenge."

Sad to say, it's real.

Prompted by internet dares, dozens of U.S. teenagers in recent weeks have popped liquid laundry detergent packets from a variety of manufacturers into their mouths just to see what happens, according to the American Association of Poison Control Centers (AAPCC).

There have been 39 reported cases of teens intentionally ingesting laundry pods during the first 15 days of 2018, poison control center statistics show.

That's exactly as many cases reported for the entire year of 2016, and nearly three-quarters of the 53 intentional misuse cases reported to poison control in 2017, the AAPCC said.

"It's one of those things that seems to have taken on a life of its own, once it became a social media meme," said Alfred Aleguas Jr., managing director of the Florida Poison Information Center-Tampa. "Frankly, it's a little crazy."

The plastic skins of laundry pods are designed to dissolve on contact with water and automatically release the pods' contents.

That means when kids pop a pod in their mouths, they're very likely going to receive a flooded snootful of chemical cleansers.

"It is important to remember that these products are highly concentrated detergent packets. Their contents can cause serious harm if they are ingested or come into contact with the eyes or skin," said the American Cleaning Institute, a trade industry group. "They are not a toy and should not be used in pranks. Product safety is not a joke."

Dr. Alfred Sacchetti, chief of emergency medicine at Our Lady of Lourdes Medical Center in Camden, N.J., noted that "any detergent is to some extent a caustic. It can burn you."

Scarring from severe burns to the esophagus could create a long-term choking hazard for a teen, he explained.

"Now the opening from your mouth to your stomach has been narrowed. Food gets stuck. If you try and eat a hot dog, it gets stuck," Sacchetti said.

Kids could require a food tube implanted into their stomach to keep them nourished while they undergo multiple surgeries to repair the throat damage, he added.

At the very least, kids who stick a pod in their mouth will cough, gag and foam at the mouth. At worst, they could experience diarrhea and vomiting, chemical burns to their throat and airways, severe breathing problems, seizures and even a coma, poison control experts said.

"We've even had some deaths" in years past, Aleguas said. "There's something about these single-load liquid laundry packets that make them more toxic."

When laundry pods first hit the market several years ago, experts were particularly concerned about young children trying to eat them. The pods are very colorful and look like candy.

Indeed, children aged 5 and under were far and away most affected by intentional and unintentional exposure to single-load liquid laundry packets in 2017, accounting for 10,583 of the total 12,299 cases reported to the nation's poison control centers.

As a result, most messages about laundry pods have focused on warning parents to keep them out of the hands of young children. Poison centers even have gone so far as to recommend that parents with kids 5 and under not use the pods at all, Aleguas said.

"I thought we were getting a pretty good handle on it in our pediatric population," Aleguas said. "I'd never expected this from older children, honestly."

Putting the pods in a locked cabinet won't help with teenagers, since they can just hit the supermarket and buy their own if they're determined to pull this stunt, Aleguas said.

"Parents should sit down and talk with their teens and say, 'Yes, it seems funny and we know it's going around on social media, but it really has the potential to produce some very severe symptoms,'" Aleguas said. "You really are playing with fire. It's all fun and games until someone shows up in the emergency department."

Dr. Boris Khodorkovsky, associate chair of emergency medicine for Staten Island University Hospital in New York City, doesn't mince words about the fad.

"It's one of the most ridiculous things I ever heard in my life," Khodorkovsky said.

Along with the potential harm from the laundry chemicals, Khodorkovsky is also concerned that the pods' plastic skin might not dissolve completely. If inhaled, the plastic film could close off a person's airway and prevent breathing.

If your child is suffering mild symptoms, you should call the national poison help hotline at 1-800-222-1222 for advice, experts said. You also can text POISON to 797979 to save the number in your mobile phone.

Act quickly at any hint of worse symptoms, or if the child already has a chronic breathing condition like asthma, Khodorkovsky said.

"If there's any suggestions of losing consciousness, problems breathing, drooling in the mouth or, God forbid, having a seizure of some sort, I think that's something where they'll need to call 911 immediately," Khodorkovsky said. "I wouldn't wait and call poison control. I would call 911 because those are significant symptoms."

SOURCES: Alfred Aleguas Jr., Pharm.D., managing director, Florida Poison Information Center-Tampa; Alfred Sacchetti, M.D., chief, emergency medicine, Our Lady of Lourdes Medical Center, Camden, N.J.; Boris Khodorkovsky, M.D., associate chair, emergency medicine, Staten Island University Hospital, New York City

Copyright © 2013-2017 HealthDay. All rights reserved.