



NEW CYANIDE POISON ANTIDOTE FOR THOSE CAUGHT IN TOXIC SMOKE

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The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has approved a cyanide antidote kit that can be carried on ambulances and stocked in hospital emergency rooms to save lives of firefighters and civilians who inhale toxic smoke.

The approval comes nine months after several firefighters in Providence, R. I., suffered from cyanide poisoning after inhaling smoke at structure fires.

The firefighters were given an antidote for cyanide by an emergency room physician who quickly recognized the signs of cyanide poisoning. That antidote, the only one on the market in the United States, is a kit that can be administered only in a hospital because it causes serious side effects, including severe low blood pressure, and can kill if given to someone who is misdiagnosed.

The nearly odorless hydrogen cyanide gas is an invisible killer that's emitted in smoldering and burning synthetics or plastics, most often-common household goods, or foam, asphalt and construction material. Inhaling cyanide can cause headaches and dizziness, or seizures and death in a matter of minutes to hours.

While smoke inhalation is responsible for up to 80 percent of fire-related injuries and deaths in the United States, there's no definitive study of how many injuries or deaths are caused by cyanide poisoning. Few hospitals test for cyanide, mainly because the results take longer than the time needed to save the patient.

The new antidote, Cyanokit, is safe enough to be given to victims at the scene of a fire - and works fast enough to save lives in minutes, according to the manufacturer, Merck KGaA of Germany. The antidote would be given to smoke-inhalation victims who are dizzy, confused or lapsing into a coma - a sign of cyanide poisoning.

Cyanokit contains hydroxocobalamin, a precursor to vitamin B-12, which binds to cyanide and neutralizes it so the poison is no longer toxic and can be eliminated harmlessly from the body through urination. The drug is given intravenously and acts immediately. Some side effects include temporary discoloration of the skin and urine.

This is the same antidote that's been used for years by firefighters in France and some other European countries, but never here. Cyanokit was introduced to the FDA this summer by EMD Pharmaceuticals Inc. and will be marketed by Dey LP, both U.S. affiliates of Merck KGaA. Cyanokit is expected to be on the market nationwide early next year, said Elliott Berger, vice president of regulatory affairs for EMD Pharmaceuticals Inc. The cost has not been determined yet, he said.

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