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May 13, 2015

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Ten People Poisoned by Poison-hemlock So Far This Year

Spring is peak time for poisonings by Parsley-family lookalike

Olympia—May 13, 2015—The Washington Poison Center has treated 10 people so far this year who have eaten poison-hemlock (*Conium maculatum*). Because not all incidents are reported, that might be only the tip of the iceberg, says Dr. Alexander Garrard, the center's toxicologist and clinic managing director. Spring is the peak time for people to eat poison-hemlock, which they mistake for many edible and other deadly wild plants—most of which have similar-looking leaves, flowers, and seeds. In Washington, one person died in 1999 after eating poison-hemlock, and another in 2010. Long before that, in 399 BCE Socrates killed himself by drinking poison-hemlock tea.

All parts of poison-hemlock can kill humans and animals, even when it is dried. Foragers can easily mistake it for wild carrot (Queen Anne's lace), parsley, parsnip, sweet cicely, anise, fennel, wild chervil, and caraway, as well as other plants in the Parsley or Carrot family (Apiaceae), such as the violently toxic western-water-hemlock, or watercress, which is in another family. Toxic alkaloids in poison-hemlock affect the nervous system, causing such symptoms as a burning sensation in the mouth, nausea, vomiting, confusion, rapid heartbeat, seizures, and paralysis. Death is by respiratory paralysis. There is no antidote. Even touching the plant may cause a severe skin reaction in some people.

“Misidentifying poison hemlock or other toxic plants can have truly tragic results” says Alison Halpern, executive secretary of the State Noxious Weed Control Board. “Learn from an expert before foraging wild plants, and if you think you have poison hemlock on your property, contact

your county weed board, conservation district, or WSU Extension office to learn how to safely get rid of it.”

Description

To avoid poisoning or severe rash, before eating or attempting to remove poison-hemlock, confirm its identification with your county noxious weed board

(http://www.nwcb.wa.gov/nwcb_county.htm); conservation district

(<http://scc.wa.gov/contacts/conservation-districts/>); or WSU Extension

(<http://extension.wsu.edu/locations/Pages/default.aspx>).

Widespread in Washington State, poison-hemlock aggressively invades roadsides, construction sites, vacant lots, streambanks, and gardens, especially where the soil is moist. It shows up as a weed in pastures, and meadows. It can end up in hay or silage and poison animals.

Poison-hemlock is difficult to distinguish from other plants in the Carrot or Parsley family (Apiaceae). Telltale characteristics are purple spots on a smooth, hairless, hollow stem 2 to 12 feet tall and a musty smell some liken to mouse urine. Unrelated to hemlock trees, poison-hemlock spends its first year as a rosette of glossy, fernlike leaves; in this stage, its stem may or may not show purple. In spring its second year, it produces many umbrella-shaped clusters of white flowers, which develop into ridged seeds. In contrast, wild carrot (*Daucus carota*) has one dense flower cluster on a narrow, hairy stem, sometimes with one purple flower in the center, and is usually 3 feet tall or less.

Controlling

Poison-hemlock is a Class B noxious invasive weed. Some Washington State counties require removing it, but control is recommended everywhere to prevent its spread.

Remove small patches by digging, making sure to remove the taproot. Don't mow or cut plants as they will only resprout, and the cut plants can release toxic fumes. For larger patches, herbicides containing glyphosate can be effective, especially when the plant is a rosette. Don't apply herbicides to mature plants because they will set seed before they die. Herbicide treatments may need to be repeated as seeds in the soil germinate.

To prevent contact poisoning, wear gloves, eye protection, a mask, and other protective clothing when removing poison-hemlock and surrounding soil. Never burn poison-hemlock, as the smoke can trigger asthma, and don't leave plants where children or livestock might get them, as the dried plants are just as poisonous. Never compost plants. Put them in plastic bags, and throw them in the trash.

Other actions

Danger! Take anyone who has eaten poison-hemlock to the emergency room immediately. If you think you or someone you know might have eaten poison-hemlock, call the Washington Poison Center, at 1-800-222-1222.

***Plants in this press release**

Common name	Scientific name
Carrot/Parsley family name	Apiaciae (no italics)
anise	<i>Myrrhis odorata</i>
caraway	<i>Carum carvi</i>
fennel	<i>Foeniculum vulgare</i>
hemlock (the tree)	<i>Tsuga</i> spp.
parsnip, wild parsnip	<i>Pastinaca sativa</i>
poison-hemlock	<i>Conium maculatum</i>
sweet cicely	<i>Osmorhiza berteroi</i>
watercress (Brassicaceae, or Mustard family)	<i>Nasturtium officinale</i>
western water-hemlock	<i>Cicuta douglasii</i>
wild carrot, or Queen Anne's lace	<i>Daucus carota</i>
wild chervil (two species)	<i>Anthriscus</i> species

Photographs

These and more photos available at <http://www.nwcb.wa.gov/detail.asp?weed=38#photos>.



Poison-hemlock stem. <http://www.nwcb.wa.gov/admin/WeedImages/Poisonhemlock4.jpg>



Young poison-hemlock. <http://www.nwcb.wa.gov/admin/WeedImages/poisonhemlock12.jpg>



Poison-hemlock flowering. <http://www.nwcb.wa.gov/admin/WeedImages/poisonhemlock12.jpg>

Alison: What about the photo of the dead cow?

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