

POISONology

SAFETY & FIRST AID TIPS FROM THE ARIZONA POISON AND DRUG INFORMATION CENTER

What happens if I eat silica gel?



If there's one thing most people know about silica gel, the unseen substance that occupies those little white packets inserted in new shoe boxes, purses, and Asian snack foods, it's that you're not supposed to eat it. Usually, the scary warning "do not eat" is displayed across the packet. Often it is accompanied by the command, "throw away." In case that's not clear enough, a few varieties have a skull and crossbones. OK, so, what happens if you eat it?

Nothing. Silica gel is a form of the naturally occurring mineral silicon dioxide, better known in its granular form as sand or in crystals as quartz. It absorbs up to 40 percent of its weight in water and has been widely used to remove moisture by placing it inside containers to prevent the contents from getting damp. Used in everything from museum display cases to electronic equipment packaging to boxes of seaweed, it is popular in part because—contrary to the warnings—it is essentially harmless. Indigestible, it passes through the body and comes out looking much the same as when it went in.

So why all the doom and gloom on the labeling? Because a surprising number of people, especially children, mistake the packets for food. In 2009, some 38,000 people reported swallowing these packets, according to the American Association of Poison Control Centers. Of those, 34,000 were under the age of 6. In most cases, poison control experts simply tell the parents not to worry. However, silica gel could cause problems if eaten in large quantities, especially by small children or adults with conditions that make it hard to swallow. The bigger danger, however, is that many children don't just eat the beads; they eat the whole packet. In that case, the hazard isn't poison, it's choking.

Just to be sure: While silica gel is the most common drying agent approved for use in food products, other, less harmless substances are occasionally used in other types of consumer products. Also, a few varieties of silica gel come coated with cobalt chloride, which is considered toxic. Swallowing a large amount at once is not too dangerous, but it may cause nausea and vomiting. For that reason, experts recommend calling a poison control center if you swallow a "do not eat" packet, just to be safe. The nationwide hot line for any poison emergency in the United States is 1-800-222-1222.

If you have other poisoning concerns or questions call the tollfree national hotline at 1-800-222-1222 to reach your local poison center. If you live in Arizona outside of Maricopa County, this number will get you to our experts at the Arizona Poison and Drug Information Center in Tucson.