

Impact of COVID-19 on the number and type of calls to the Belgian Poison Centre

Dominique Vandijck^{1,2}, Eline Bekaert¹, Evelien De Smet¹, Jonas Moens¹, Pamela Selway¹, Jonas Van Baelen¹, Pascale Wallemacq¹, Anne-Marie Descamps^{1,2}

¹ Belgian Poison Centre, Brussels, Belgium

² Ghent University, Faculty of Medicine and Health Sciences, Ghent, Belgium

Objective

The present study provides an overview of the number and type of calls to the Belgian Poison Centre (BPC), and the impact of COVID-19.

Methods

Data of all calls to the BPC (January 1 – December 31, 2020) were collected and analysed using appropriate statistics (SAS).

Results

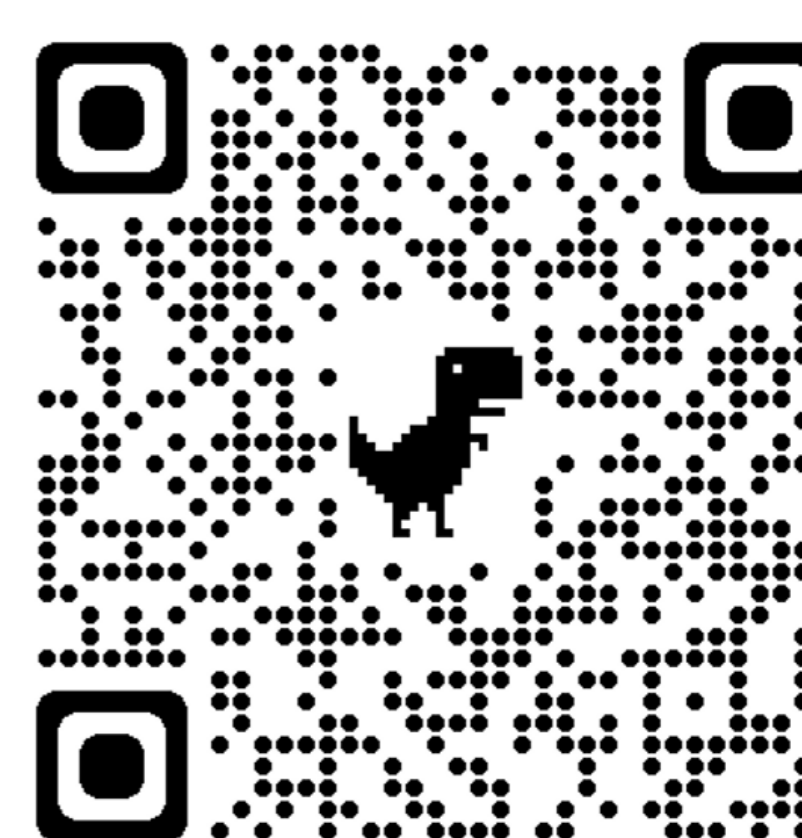
The BPC received 65,308 calls in 2020 (60,668 in 2019, $p < 0.05$). The vast majority (35.9%) of exposures were drug-related (21,151 in 2019 vs. 20,666 in 2020, $p > 0.05$) followed by the use of chemical household products (11,836 in 2019 vs. 12,247 in 2020, $p > 0.05$). A 12.3% increase of the number of cosmetic- and food-related exposures was noted (8,291 in 2019 vs. 9,308 in 2020, $p < 0.05$). Within this group, a stable number of exposures (877 in 2019 vs. 876 in 2020, $p > 0.05$) due to essential oils exposures were observed.

Partly due to the impact of the COVID-19¹ pandemic, exposures to biocides doubled (104.9%) from 1,964 in 2019 to 4,024 in 2020 ($p < 0.05$). Exposures to type 1 biocides (i.e. human hygiene, which includes ABHS) significantly increased from 322 in 2019 to 1,676 in 2020 ($p < 0.05$), and exposures to type 2 biocides (i.e. disinfectants and algaecides not intended for direct application to humans or animals) from 406 to 902 ($p < 0.05$). In 2020 the BPC received a fivefold of the number of calls for ABHS incidents (both, liquid and gel-based, as well as ethanol and isopropanol products) as compared to 2019 (323 in 2019 vs 1,676 in 2020 calls, $p < 0.05$), accounting for 2.6% of all calls in 2020. In 71% of exposures, ingestion was the primary route (1,195/1,676), followed by 28.6% accidental ocular exposures (480/1,676) of which more than half of the incidents among children (257/480, $p < 0.05$), and primarily among young children aged between 1 and 4 years (136/257, $p < 0.05$). Finally, as people went into the garden and nature to relax during the lockdowns, a 28.2% increase in exposures related to the group 'plants, mushrooms and animals' was found, with 3,256 exposures in 2019 and 4,175 in 2020 ($p < 0.05$).

¹ Vandijck D, Roels D, Van Baelen J, et al. Accidental ocular chemical injury following alcohol-based hand sanitizer exposure: incidence and management. *Clin Toxicol.* 2021;7:1-2

Conclusion

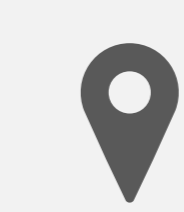
In its history, the BPC never received as much calls as in 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic contributed to a significant number of additional exposures, and requests for toxicological advice.



CONTACT



dominique.vandijck@poisoncentre.be



Belgian Poison Centre
Bruynstraat 1, 1120 Brussels
(Belgium)



(+32) 02 264 96 36



[dominique_vandijck](https://www.instagram.com/dominique_vandijck)



[VandijckD](https://twitter.com/VandijckD)



[Dominique Vandijck](https://www.linkedin.com/in/DominiqueVandijck)



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