Coronavirus (COVID-19) Update: FDA Warns Not to Use Dangerous Alcohol-Based Hand Sanitizers Containing Methanol, Citing Severe Side Effects and Death

Practicing good hand hygiene that includes using alcohol-based hand sanitizers, if soap and water are not readily available, is an important public health tool for all Americans to employ. However, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) warns consumers and healthcare professionals not to use certain alcohol-based hand sanitizers due to the dangerous presence of methanol, also known as wood alcohol – a substance often used to create fuel and antifreeze that can be toxic when absorbed through the skin as well as life-threatening when ingested. Methanol exposure can result in nausea, vomiting, headache, blurred vision, permanent blindness, seizures, coma, permanent damage to the nervous system or death.

Although people using methanol products on their hands are at risk for methanol poisoning, young children who ingest these products and adolescents and adults who drink these products as an alcohol (ethanol) substitute are most at risk.

The FDA has posted a do-not-use list of dangerous hand sanitizer products that is updated regularly. In most cases, methanol does not appear on the product label; nevertheless, even if methanol is listed as an ingredient on the product label, methanol is not an acceptable ingredient in any drug, including for hand sanitizers. The FDA’s ongoing testing has found methanol contamination in hand sanitizer products ranging from 1% to 80%.
Consumers who have been exposed to hand sanitizer containing methanol and are experiencing symptoms should seek immediate medical treatment for potential reversal of the toxic effects of methanol poisoning. If any of the identifiers (name, company, or NDC) match a product on the list, the FDA urges consumers to stop using the hand sanitizer immediately. Dispose of the hand sanitizer bottle in a hazardous waste container, if available, or dispose of as recommended by local waste management and recycling centers. Do not flush or pour these products down the drain or mix with other liquids.

In addition, the FDA encourages healthcare professionals, consumers and patients to report adverse events or quality problems experienced with the use of hand sanitizers to FDA’s MedWatch Adverse Event Reporting program (please provide the agency with as much information to identify the product as possible).

For more information and a copy of the do-not-use list of dangerous hand sanitizer products click here.