

A Sweet Poison

Antifreeze Poisons and Kills

It begins with slurred speech and a little tipsiness, like you might get from a couple of cocktails. About 24 hours later, like a terrible hangover, you develop a searing headache, followed by nausea and dizziness. Then comes the hyperventilation and delusions. The body's survival instincts kick in with vomiting and diarrhea—a futile attempt to expel a deadly poison. If an antidote is not administered quickly, death from acute kidney failure, heart attack or coma inevitably follows.

Every year, about 10,000 dogs, cats and children are victims of accidental poisoning by automobile antifreeze. In 2003 nearly 1,400 children ended up in emergency rooms because of antifreeze poisoning, according to the Consumer Product Safety Commission.

The American Association of Poison Control Centers reported 2,372 accidental poisonings related to Ethylene Glycol (EG) antifreeze in 1987. 765 of these were children under six years of age. The Humane society of the United States names EG as one of the most dangerous Household hazards to children and pets, not to mention wildlife. Further, they estimate that the actual deaths of companion animals and wildlife due to EG poisoning runs into the tens of thousands every year.

A child or a pet doesn't have to drink a lot of antifreeze to be poisoned. A few ounces, 3 or 4 tablespoons, can be lethal for a child. Even a few licks of this sweet-tasting liquid can be fatal to a cat or dog. For a medium sized dog, ingestion of about 2 ounces is toxic. For cats, as little as $\frac{1}{4}$ of an ounce can be lethal. Children may take in large amounts since the substance tastes good. Alcoholics may also drink it as a substitute for alcohol.

And the tragedy is that every instance of antifreeze poisoning can be easily and inexpensively prevented.

On May 24, 2005 U.S. Rep. Gary Ackerman and Senator George Allen introduced legislation in the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate, respectively, requiring antifreeze to contain a bittering agent to render the substance unpalatable to pets and children, helping to assure they would no longer drink the poisonous chemical. The bittering agent they are considering is denatonium benzoate, the world's most bitter substance.

Denatonium benzoate is a harmless compound that, even in extremely small quantities, makes ingestion impossible. It is harmless to people, animals, plants and the environment. And the addition of 30 parts per million will make antifreeze unpalatable. How much are we talking about? One (1) teaspoon for 50 gallons of antifreeze at a literal cost of pennies per gallon. That's right – about 3 or 4 cents per gallon.

So why are legislators and manufacturers dragging their feet? One would think this is a no-brainer.

Many states, and even some cities, are considering legislation requiring the addition of the bitterent denatonium benzoate to antifreeze, making it virtually impossible for a child or animal to be poisoned by this sweet-tasting liquid.