CLINICAL IMAGES

A Dangerous Cup of Tea

Case Presentation

A 24-year-old woman presented to the Emergency Department with palpitations and watery emesis 2 hours after ingesting a cup of tea. The tea had been brewed from dried flowers that had been picked in a mountainous area of southern California. She had previously dissolved the flowers in oil and applied them topically to resolve bruises. She ingested the flowers in tea in an attempt to

relieve postoperative pain after a cesarean section. She had no other medical problems, had no known allergies, and took no other medications or herbal supplements. Physical examination was notable for pulse in the 120s, epigastric tenderness, and multiple episodes of nonbloody, non-bilious emesis. Electrocardiogram showed sinus tachycardia. Complete blood cell count, chemistry, and coagulation panel were normal. What was the cause of her symptoms?

Figure. Dried flowers used by the patient.

Diagnosis and Treatment

Arnica toxicity. *Arnica* (Figure), a genus in the sunflower family that grows in temperate areas of the western United States, is the homeopathic remedy most frequently studied in clinical trials.¹ When used topically, it is believed by homeopaths to resolve bruises and reduce muscle soreness. However, a review of placebo-controlled clinical trials found no data to support its efficacy.^{1,2} Components of the plant have immunomodulatory and cytotoxic effects.³ Helenalin, a toxin in *Arnica*, inhibits platelet aggregation.³ When ingested orally, *Arnica* may result in tachyarrhythmia, respiratory distress, gastrointestinal hemorrhage, muscle weakness, or death.^{4,5} There is no antidote to *Arnica* toxicity and treatment is supportive.

Our patient received intravenous fluids and antiemetics. She was observed in the Emergency Department until her symptoms resolved and vital signs normalized.

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References

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