Overdosing with apricot kernels – seriously?

Dear Sir,

Psychiatrists reading RANZCP journals may not be aware of risks posed by stone fruit, in particular apricot kernels. This letter aims to educate psychiatrists on the risks of cyanide poisoning from apricot kernels. We quote a case of cyanide poisoning from 2015. Scientific evidence on the risks secondary to small amounts is provided. Psychiatrists will be up to date with knowledge on the risks apricot kernels. Searching RANZCP journals using key words stone fruit and apricot kernels will yield a reference highlighting metrics and risks.

Apricot kernels are touted as an alternative medication for treating or preventing cancer. Apricot kernels may sound benign – but they are not. The risk of overdose is real. We are writing to inform readers of this journal of this hidden risk: we are concerned by hazards associated with acute ingestion, accidental or in the context of self-harm, of unprocessed apricot kernels, which, due to cyanide, are many times more dangerous compared with other kernels, at even small quantities.

Although prohibited for sale in Australia and New Zealand as a food, purchase for cosmetic use is not illegal.1 Severe risks to health with need for admission, including to intensive care, have been reported.2 Cyanogenic glycosides can be found in plants including fruit and vegetables such as sorghum, cassava, lima beans, bamboo shoots, apple seeds and the kernels of members of Prunus, for example, almonds and, importantly, apricot kernels.3 The latter can contain up to 6% amygdalin and are most likely to cause acute cyanide poisoning.4 The LD50 for humans is 0.5–3.5 mg per kg body weight.3 In 2015, a sample of ground apricot kernels purchased in Australia yielded levels of cyanide above and beyond the upper limit of calibration at over 3000 mg/kg.4 Intoxication can present with weakness, vomiting, with neurological signs such as dystonia, epileptic seizure, collapse and coma, with positive investigations yielding lactic metabolic acidosis and hyperglycaemia. Chronic ingestion may cause paralysis and a variety of neurological disorders.3 One-quarter of a teaspoon of ground apricot kernels can suffice to cause severe cyanide intoxication.4 Treatment for cyanide poisoning is supportive medical care and administration of antidotes, with variable effectiveness.5 If a patient states intent to overdose on apricot kernels, this needs to be taken seriously. To our knowledge this letter is the first mention of the risk of poisoning from ingestion of apricot kernels in any RANZCP journal.

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References


