National Poison Prevention Week is March 15-21. The New Jersey Department of Health (NJDOH) is working to raise awareness of the serious health risk, particularly to young children, of liquid nicotine, commonly used in e-cigarettes. Accidental exposure to liquid nicotine by children has become a serious public health concern. Nicotine, an active ingredient used at varying levels in e-cigarette liquids, has potentially deadly toxic properties. Poison centers have seen a dramatic rise in e-cigarette related calls and more than half of the calls involved children age five and under. Liquid nicotine has caused the death of an 18 month old in New York. E-cigarettes or electronic cigarettes are battery-operated devices that contain a combination of nicotine, flavor, and chemicals that are turned into vapor inhaled by the user.

The liquids used to refill electronic cigarettes contain nicotine, flavor and other chemicals. The containers are not required to be child-proof. Some small bottles of e-liquid contain sufficient nicotine to be fatal to four small children. One swallow can be fatal. Children may be drawn to the colorful liquid available in hundreds of tantalizing candy and fruit flavors. There are three routes of exposure that are toxic to children. Even without swallowing, when taken into the mouth, liquid nicotine will be absorbed into the child's mucous membranes, just like nicotine gum. If swallowed, it will be absorbed in the intestinal tract. If it comes into contact with a child's skin - through a spill, for example - the liquid nicotine is absorbed through the skin just like a nicotine patch.

Symptoms of liquid nicotine poisoning include vomiting, difficulty breathing, increased heart rate, and a jittery and unsteady appearance.

The goal of NJDOH's liquid nicotine poison prevention effort is to protect the lives of children and prevent tragic and avoidable harm through public awareness and consumer protection. Parents, caregivers, other family members and friends who "vape," the popular term for e-cigarette smoking, need to be aware of the potential dangers and keep the e-cigarette devices and liquid nicotine refills stored safely out-of-reach of small children.

Anyone who suspects that a child has been exposed to liquid nicotine should call the NJ Poison Help Hotline at 1-800-222-1222 and seek medical attention immediately.

To learn more about e-cigarettes and the harmful effects of liquid nicotine, visit the U.S. Food and Drug Administration's website at http://www.fda.gov/newsevents/publichealthfocus/ucm172906.htm or go to the CDC's Office on Smoking and Health at http://www.cdc.gov/tobacco/basic_information/e-cigarettes/adult-trends/

Information above is by Mary E. O'Dowd, MPH, NJ Health Commissioner.