



BOSTON PUBLIC HEALTH COMMISSION  
Communicable Disease Control Division  
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## HEALTH ALERT: Childhood seizures associated with the use of camphor products

**SUMMARY:** Four children under two years old were hospitalized in New York City for seizures after misuse of over-the-counter camphor products. The seizures occurred after inhalation, absorption through the skin, or accidental ingestion of unlabeled camphor products. All four cases in New York were Latino, but the use of camphor products is common in many cultures. **Although no cases have been identified in Boston, unlabelled camphor (Spanish-*alcanfor*) cubes have been found in Boston area botanicas and discount retail stores.**

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### BACKGROUND

Camphor is an active ingredient in many over-the-counter nasal decongestants, topical antitussive agents, and analgesics. Interviews with Boston families indicated that camphor cubes may be used in humidifiers or vaporizers, as an air freshener, and as an insecticide. In some cultures, small pieces of camphor may be wrapped in cloth and tied to a newborn's ankle as a blessing, secured to the wrist of a sick child, or placed inside a pillow to relieve cold symptoms.

In 1983, the FDA banned the sale of products containing more than 11% camphor. FDA approved camphor products must be labeled with directions for use, appropriate warnings, and manufacturer's information. Camphor products that are not labeled in accordance with FDA guidelines are illegal and unsafe.

The camphor products implicated in the four cases in New York were sold as small white tablets or cubes. Camphor cubes are available for purchase in Boston-area botanicas, bodegas, and discount stores. The white cubes are sold in packages of four, wrapped in clear plastic, and are not labeled for indication, ingredients, or manufacturer information.

### SYMPTOMS AND DIAGNOSIS

Camphor is easily absorbed through the skin, gastrointestinal and respiratory tract. The main symptoms of toxicity in children may include burning in the mouth, nausea, vomiting and central nervous system effects such as irritability, restlessness, and seizures. Symptom onset is rapid (generally within 5 to 15 minutes of ingestion) and peaks within 90 minutes.

The Boston Public Health Commission recommends that Boston area healthcare providers ask the child's caregivers about household use of camphor for patients with new onset seizure or seizure disorder not attributable to other etiologies.

### PREVENTION AND MORE INFORMATION

Call the Poison control center for guidance on the management of camphor poisoning at 1-800-222-1222.

Information sheets (English and Spanish) are attached for distribution to patients.