Poison Center & Public Health Collaborations Community of Practice (PCPHCoP)

NEWSLETTER

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR April 2026

Greetings!

Welcome to the first Poison Center and Public Health Collaboration Community of Practice (PCPHCoP) Newsletter of 2026! Our goal is to bring community members content that enriches knowledge and understanding of the roles of both poison centers (PCs) and public health personnel and how they intersect.

With spring here, the featured topic for this PCPHCoP newsletter is foraging and safety, tips, and look-alikes. Many locations throughout the United States have seen an increased interest in recent years to connect with nature, eat locally, and explore wild foods. However, this trend also brings heightened risk because many toxic plants and fungi closely resemble edible species, and even small misidentifications can lead to serious poisonings. Careful education, awareness, and safety practices are essential for both the public and healthcare providers.

We hope you enjoy this first newsletter of the new year. If you would like to hear more about a specific topic in a future newsletter, please feel free to reach out to our team. Thank you all for your support and continuing to make PCPHCoP a success!

Sincerely,
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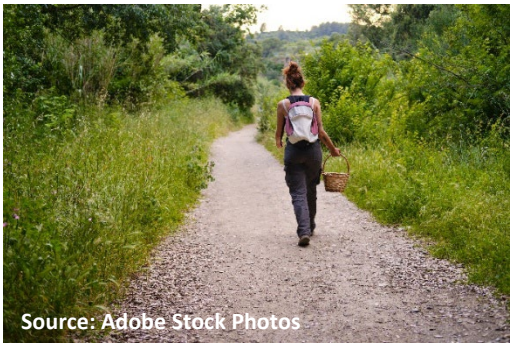
What is Foraging? A Brief Overview and Growing Trend

Foraging is the practice of harvesting wild plants, fungi, berries, and roots for food or medicinal use.[1] It is one of the oldest human survival practices, dating back thousands of years before agriculture. Many indigenous communities continue to maintain deep ecological knowledge of edible and medicinal species, grounded in generational expertise and stewardship.[2]



Source: Adobe Stock Photos


Source: Adobe Stock Photos

In recent years, foraging has resurged in popularity in the United States due to

- Interest in local and sustainable food systems and being mindful of food[3]
- Rising grocery costs[3]
- Culinary trends emphasizing wild ingredients[3]
- Social media, online foraging communities, and a sense of camaraderie[2,3]

This resurgence in foraging has brought many individuals closer to nature and has deepened the connections humans have to the natural world. While foraging can promote environmental awareness and food literacy, it also carries significant health risks. Misidentification of wild plants and mushrooms is the top safety hazard when it comes to foraging because there are many plants that are toxic and can look like edible plants. Poison centers and public health agencies play a critical role in surveillance, prevention messaging, and clinical consultation during seasonal spikes in plant and mushroom exposures.

How Foraging Can Be Dangerous

Many toxic plants and mushrooms closely resemble edible species, and it can be difficult to distinguish, even for experienced foragers. Misidentification is one of the most common plant and mushroom poisonings. Additionally, many toxic plants can cause severe illness even after small exposures.[4,5]

Environmental factors can also increase the dangers of foraging. Weather conditions, such as heavy rainfall, can increase the growth of wild mushrooms and increase the likelihood that people will forage toxic mushrooms. Appearance can also change throughout the life cycle of plants, making identification more difficult.[6]

Key risk factors include

- Incomplete identification—not all plant identifying apps or field guides are accurate.[4,5]
- Regional variation—plants that are edible in one region may be a toxic look-alike in another region.[4]
- Symptoms can be delayed—symptoms can come on quickly or be delayed and require immediate medical attention.[5]
- Foraging alone—a second pair of eyes can help with identification or safety in wooded areas.[5]

Some plant and fungal toxins cause delayed symptoms, which may lead to false reassurance before severe toxicity develops.


Source: Adobe Stock Photos


Source: Adobe Stock Photos

Look-Alikes: Toxic vs. Edible Species

Misidentification is the leading driver of foraging-related poisonings.[4] Below are some of the commonly misidentified look-alike pairs.

Poison Hemlock[7]

Scientific Name: *Conium maculatum*

Key Identification Features

- Purple or red blotchy stem
- Hairless stem
- White flowers cluster
- Strong musty odor when crushed
- Bright green leaves with toothed edges

This plant is toxic and should not be consumed. It can cause nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, central nervous system depression, and respiratory paralysis.

Wild Carrot[8]

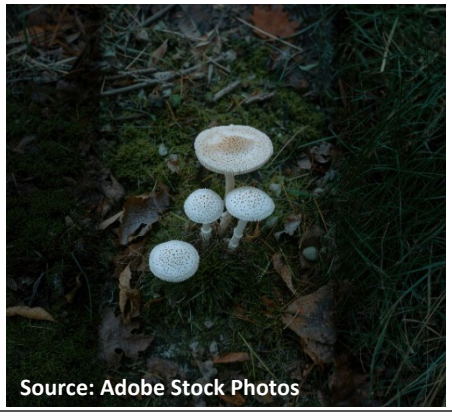
Scientific Name: *Daucus carota*

Key Identification Features

- Green or burgundy-green stem
- Hairy stem
- White flowers in umbrella cluster
- Carrot smell when crushed
- Fern-like leaves

This plant is edible and safe to eat when the plant is healthy.

Death Cap Mushrooms[9]



Scientific Name: *Amanita phalloides*

Key Identification Features

- White mushroom with light brown, yellow, or white top
- Look different throughout their various stages
- Middle shows outline of blooming mushroom when cut

This mushroom is toxic and can cause abdominal pain, vomiting, liver failure, and death.

Puffball Mushrooms[10]

Scientific Name: *Lycoperdon perlatum*

Key Identification Features

- Round and white
- Sometimes a light brown top
- Soft, solid white middle
- No gills

These mushrooms are edible and safe when the interior is solid white.

Death Camas[11,12]

Scientific Name: *Toxicoscordion venenosum*

Key Identification Features

- Small and cream-colored flowers
- No scent
- Solid stem
- Large bulb with black tunic

This plant is toxic and can cause vomiting, low heart rate/blood pressure, and paralysis.

Wild Onion[11,13]

Scientific Name: *Allium drummondii*

Key Identification Features

- Garlic/onion smell
- Hollow stem structure
- Spherical, umbrella-like flowers
- Smaller bulb with brown, papery covering

This plant is edible and safe to eat when the plant is healthy.

False Morel[14,15]

Scientific Name: *Gyromitra spp.*

Key Identification Features

- Brain-like shape
- Dark reddish color
- Ridged, wrinkled, waved or smooth feeling
- Not hollow inside

This mushroom is not edible and may cause nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, diarrhea, and seizures.

True Morel[14]

Scientific Name: *Morchella americana*

Key Identification Features

- Usually white, gray, or black
- Varies from cream to gray to yellowish-brown
- Hollow cap attached to stalk
- Sprouts in May

This mushroom is edible and safe when healthy without blemishes.

Spotlight: Death Cap Mushrooms and the Current Outbreak

The California Department of Public Health (CDPH) is currently responding to an outbreak of amatoxin poisonings from wild mushroom foraging of death cap mushrooms and western destroying angel mushrooms. As of March 17, 2026, there have been 4 fatalities, 3 liver transplants, and 39 cases that are linked to this current outbreak.[6,16]

Different stages of death cap mushrooms. Source: Adobe Stock Photos

California is seeing widespread growth of mushrooms, including death cap mushrooms (*Amanita phalloides*) and western destroying angel mushrooms (*Amanita ocreata*), because of recent rain that has affected the area. These mushrooms look similar to safe-to-eat mushrooms and are being foraged and consumed because of their like features. Cooking, boiling, or freezing does not affect the poison, so they are still dangerous to consume even if those actions are taken. Unlike the safe-to-eat options, death cap mushrooms and western destroying angel mushrooms can cause diarrhea, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, and severe liver damage if not treated.[6]

Western destroying angel mushrooms. Source: Adobe Stock Photos

CDPH has responded to this outbreak and is coordinating with the California Poison Control System on the investigation.[6] Together they have

- Tracked cases reported
- Developed and updated education materials for the public
- Released a public service announcement in English, Spanish, and Mixteco
- Developed webpages on poisonous mushrooms in English, Spanish, and Chinese
- Provided updates on their website
- Issued two California Health Alert Network (CAHAN) (12/5/25 and 1/15/26)
- Given two press releases (12/5/25 and 1/14/26)
- Hosted two press conferences

CDPH is urging all residents not to pick or eat wild mushrooms and to avoid all mushroom foraging during this high-risk season.

For more information on this outbreak and to stay updated, please visit California Department of Health's website at Poisonous Wild Mushrooms.

Foraging Safety Recommendations

Foraging can be a fun activity, but it is important to do it safely for an enjoyable experience. Here are some tips everyone should know before going out and foraging:[17]

- Know the areas to forage and respect private property.
- Educate yourself on plants and potential look-alikes.
- Don't forage plants that do not appear healthy.
- Don't forage alone.
- Consult an expert before consuming anything foraged.
- Consult your local foraging calendars. Many sites offer best times for foraging for local flora.

Announcements

Thank you to everyone who joined our first webinar on February 25 to spotlight professionals working across both poison centers and public health spaces. We had a great turn out and listened to some fun and interesting stories from our panelists!

The next quarterly PCPHCoP webinar will be held **May 27, 2026, from 3:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m. ET**. The topic will be shared with the PCPHCoP listserv once it is finalized. Please don't hesitate to email us if you have an idea for a future webinar.

Poison Emergency?

Call 1-800-222-1222 OR

Visit POISONHELP.ORG

If anyone wants to be added to the PCPHCoP email distribution list, a request can be sent to PCPHCoP@cdc.gov.

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