

Poisoning: Hidden Peril for Children

Five Japanese children, poisoned by mercury-contaminated shellfish in 1956, were the first documented cases of a major industrial pollution tragedy: an entire fishing town in Minamata Bay, Japan suffering from a debilitating nervous condition, birth defects, deafness and death.

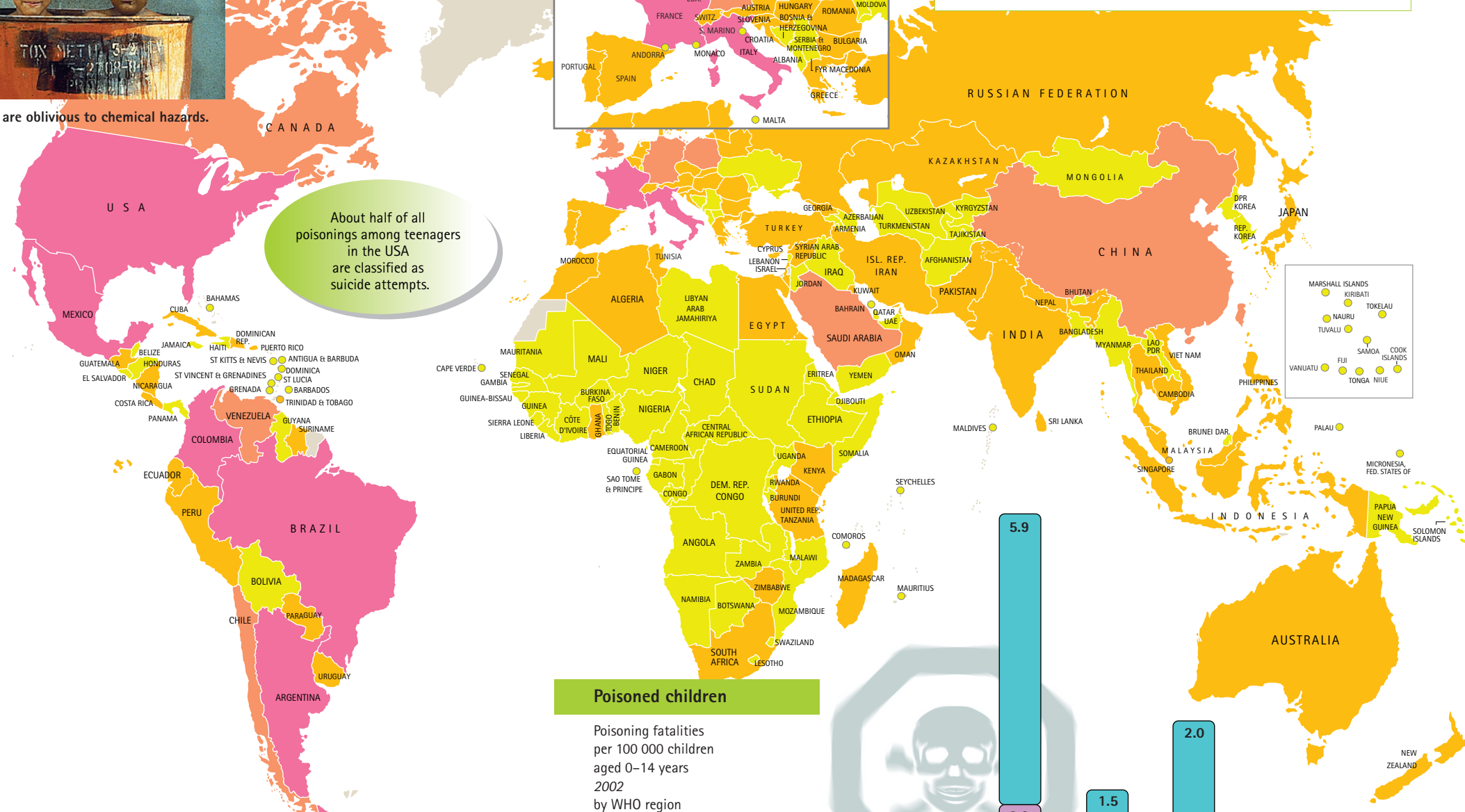
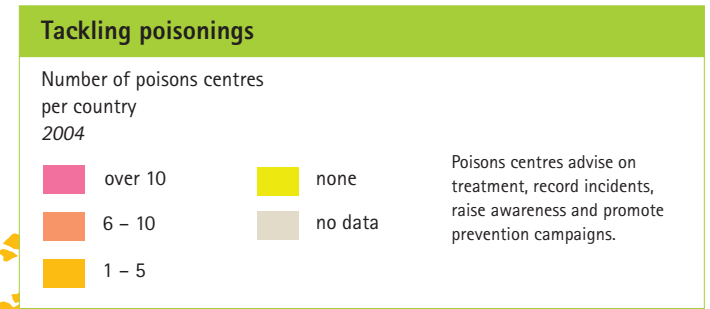
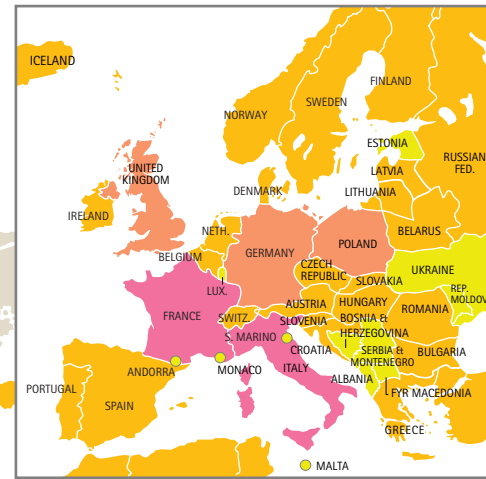


Children are oblivious to chemical hazards.

Young children are naturally inquisitive – opening, eating, and drinking what adults would recognize as poisonous. Drinking kerosene, which is often stored in soft-drinks bottles, is a common problem in developing countries. In industrialized countries, children may swallow medicines such as pain killers, iron supplements and antidepressants, which often look like sweets. Snakebites, scorpion stings, poisonous plants and fungi can also cause acute health effects in children. Concern is growing about the impact of chronic exposure to pesticide residues and heavy metals in food.

Poisons centres around the world advise on treatment, record incidents, raise awareness and promote prevention campaigns. Despite their efforts, more than 35 000 children aged 0 to 14 years die every year as a result of unintentional poisoning. Educating both adults and children, and encouraging the safe storage, use and disposal of toxic substances such as kerosene, bleach and pesticides, can reduce this toll. Moreover, the use of child-resistant packaging for medicines and household products limits children's access to toxic substances.

About half of all poisonings among teenagers in the USA are classified as suicide attempts.



Poisoned children

Poisoning fatalities per 100 000 children aged 0–14 years 2002 by WHO region

boys girls

