

Pittsburgh Poison Control Center struggles with budget cuts



Heidi Murrin | Trib Total Media

Certified Specialist in Poison Information Denise Kuspis takes a phone call in the Pittsburgh Poison Center in Oakland Monday, Nov. 3, 2014. The center covers 44 counties and takes about 100,000 calls a year.



By [Nafari Vanaski](#)

Saturday, Nov. 8, 2014, 8:16 p.m.



The Pittsburgh Poison Control Center's famous green face and "[Mr. Yuk is mean](#)" message hasn't faded with growth of the Internet or funding cuts.

People still call on the center.

"Not everyone is aware of our function. That's a perception we're trying to fight," said Michael Lynch, the director of Pittsburgh Poison Control. "Our legs have been cut out a little bit with funding."

The center, staffed by Lynch and 12 full-time and two part-time nurses, takes calls 24/7 regarding poison emergencies. It feeds information to a national database that tracks calls in real-time.

Pittsburgh and 54 other poison control centers nationwide take nearly 11,000 calls daily and are an alert system for outbreaks or specific types of poisonings. Officials estimate the nation's poison control centers save \$1.8 billion a year in medical expenses by taking calls that otherwise would be handled by hospitals and physicians, or helping to shorten hospital stays.

Lynch and the nurses estimate about 50 percent of calls involve children ages 6 and younger. But the center fields calls that sweep the spectrum, from occupational exposures to carbon monoxide to seniors

who accidentally take too much medication.

"It's not just kids and vitamins," said Elisa Gladstone, senior health analyst at the federal Health Resources and Services Administration, who noted the providers are trained in triage and treatment of poisonings.

Pennsylvania's other poison control center is in Philadelphia. The centers get federal and state money each year. The state Department of Health divides its funding evenly between the Pittsburgh and Philadelphia centers, and federal money is based on the population of a center's service area.

Funding from both levels of government has decreased since 2008. That year, the Health Resources and Services Administration gave \$1.06 million to the state's centers, and the state Health Department gave \$1.2 million. This year, the federal amount dropped to \$689,415 — Pittsburgh got \$289,000 — and the state gave each center \$350,000.

Lynch said the Pittsburgh center received about 100,000 calls in 2013 — a 5 to 10 percent drop from the previous year.

The center collects royalties from Mr. Yuk merchandise along with reimbursements from about 80 member hospitals in Western Pennsylvania and the northern panhandle of West Virginia that work with the center.

It gets \$550,000 to \$600,000 a year from consulting partnerships with companies such as Colgate and Palmolive, who print the center's national hot line number on products.

Nafari Vanaski is a Trib Total Media staff writer. Reach her at 412-856-7400, ext. 8669, nvanaski@tribweb.com or on Twitter [@NafariTrib](https://twitter.com/NafariTrib).

Copyright © 2015 — Trib Total Media
