

Charcoal is essentially pure carbon, and the terms “activated carbon” and “activated charcoal” are used interchangeably.

While coal comes from plant matter that loses its noncarbon components over a long time because of pressure and heat deep in the earth, charcoal is made quickly, by heating wood in the absence of oxygen. This leads to a charring (without burning the carbon into carbon dioxide), which drives off most everything except carbon. The process is done on a scale of hours, rather than the millions of years for coal.

How Activated Charcoal Is Given

[Activated charcoal](#) may be given by mouth to someone who is awake and alert. It is a black liquid drink.

If the person vomits the drink, another dose will be given through a nasogastric or orogastric tube (a tube inserted through the nose or mouth, down the esophagus and into the stomach).

If the person is unconscious (or nearly so), an endotracheal intubation (a procedure in which a tube is inserted through the mouth down into the trachea) may be necessary. This will allow oxygen to be delivered and will help protect the airway and lungs from gastric content. This will minimize the risk of the person vomiting and choking.

[Activated charcoal](#) is usually given by a doctor. It is not a substance to be used at home. Doctors determine the dose or amount of charcoal to give based on the patient's weight (with special doses for children) and on how much poison was swallowed. There are some doctors who will prescribe charcoal for emergency use in the home. This should only be done under the direct guidance of the doctor or poison control center.

The doctor also determines when and if additional doses are given by monitoring blood levels of the poison. Other symptoms the doctor monitors are nausea and vomiting, abdominal pain, dizziness, and severe heart problems. Multiple doses of activated charcoal can be given if someone swallowed large doses of long-acting, sustained release medications.

If blood levels of the poison remain too high, the doctor may recommend kidney dialysis. Dialysis is the best way to remove the toxin from the bloodstream.