

2 discover tasty mushrooms can be dangerous

Va., Md. men treated at D.C. hospital after dining on wild fungi

BY JOE STEPHENS

With the rainy weather recently, lawns are producing bumper crops of mushrooms. And doctors at Georgetown University Hospital are offering some advice:

No matter how tempting the fungi, don't yank them out of the ground and pop them into your mouth.

Doctors offer the cautionary tale of Frank Constantinopla, 49, who after a Sept. 12 rainstorm looked in wonder at his backyard in Springfield. "Oh, there're so many mushrooms," Constantin-

opla recalls thinking. "They look so lovely — I'm so lucky." Constantinopla plucked a handful and stir-fried them with noodles.

"They tasted good."

Problems set in within hours and continued for days. Constantinopla and his wife grew weak, their stomachs ached, they vomited. Two days later, Constantinopla went to an emergency room and was transferred to Georgetown University Hospital for a possible liver transplant.

Doctors broke the news: Those lovely mushrooms were Amanita phalloides, a toadstool commonly known as the Death Cap.

No federally approved treatment exists for mushroom poisoning, but doctors won permission to give Constantinopla an experimental drug made from milk thistle, a flowering plant

used in holistic remedies. It seemed to do the trick. By Saturday, Constantinopla was well enough to speak at a news conference.

"I'm lucky to still be alive," he said, smiling. His wife recovered without the drug.

About a week after Constantinopla's stir-fry mishap, Walter Lantz Jr., 82, a retired farmer, snacked on some fungi plucked near his home in Frederick. On Wednesday, he also ended up at Georgetown University Hospital, where the same experimental drug, silibinin, seemed to stem the damage to his liver. Lantz remains hospitalized but is expected to recover fully.

Doctors believe that Lantz ate Amanita bisporigera, a.k.a. Destroying Angel. Hospital officials said it was rare to see two mushroom-poisoning victims within a

week.

Many toadstool victims don't associate their illness with mushrooms, because symptoms are delayed and progress through three stages, experts said. The first begins six hours to a day after ingestion and may include stomach pain, nausea, vomiting and diarrhea. After a day or two, victims often see symptoms abate. But three to five days later, liver and kidney damage can lead to jaundice and coma.

Up to a third of people who eat poisonous mushrooms may die.

Constantinopla, who has yet to return to his job at a hardware store, looked robust Saturday but vowed to never eat another mushroom — store-bought or otherwise.

"Don't eat those things," he said. "They might kill you."

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