CONDITION

Aftershave poisoning

Learn how swallowing or overexposure to aftershave can affect the body, what symptoms require emergency care, and how poisoning is evaluated and treated.

WHAT IT IS
Poisoning from swallowing or overexposure to aftershave

BODY SYSTEM
Nervous and digestive systems

MAIN SYMPTOMS
Vomiting, dizziness, drowsiness or confusion, slow breathing

WHAT CAUSES IT
Toxic alcohol exposure

HOW IT IS DIAGNOSED
Exposure history, examination, blood alcohol levels

MAIN TREATMENT
Supportive care and monitoring

CAN IT BE CURED?
Sometimes - recovery depends on poisoning severity

IS IT AN EMERGENCY?
Sometimes - trouble breathing, seizure, collapse, or unresponsiveness

LONG-TERM OUTLOOK
Small exposures often resolve, but severe poisoning can cause lasting damage

Overview

Aftershave poisoning happens when someone swallows aftershave or is exposed to enough of it to cause harmful effects. Most cases involve accidental swallowing, especially by young children. Intentional ingestion can also occur.

Many aftershaves contain ethyl alcohol, also called ethanol, or isopropyl alcohol, also called rubbing alcohol. These ingredients help dissolve fragrances and create a cooling feeling on the skin. The exact ingredients and alcohol concentration differ among products.

Alcohol in aftershave can slow activity in the brain and nervous system. A large exposure may affect breathing, blood pressure, body temperature, and blood sugar. Children can become seriously ill from a smaller amount than adults because of their lower body weight. Isopropyl alcohol can also strongly irritate the stomach.

Normal use on intact skin is unlikely to cause whole-body poisoning. However, aftershave may irritate the skin or eyes. Breathing a large amount of vapor in an enclosed area may cause headache, dizziness, or irritation.

If someone has swallowed aftershave, contact a poison center promptly rather than waiting for symptoms. In the United States, call Poison Control at 1-800-222-1222 or use its online help service. Outside the United States, contact the local poison information service or emergency medical system.

Call emergency services immediately if the person has trouble breathing, collapses, has a seizure, cannot be awakened, or is severely confused.

Symptoms

Symptoms depend on the product, the amount and route of exposure, the person's age and size, and how much time has passed.

After swallowing aftershave, early symptoms may resemble alcohol intoxication. Possible symptoms include:

Low blood sugar, called hypoglycemia, is an important concern in young children. Signs may include sweating, unusual behavior, extreme sleepiness, shaking, or seizures. A child may not appear intoxicated before low blood sugar develops.

Isopropyl alcohol often causes marked stomach irritation, vomiting, and drowsiness. The body changes it into acetone, which may give the breath a sweet or nail-polish-remover odor. This odor does not show how severe the poisoning is.

Eye exposure can cause burning, redness, pain, and tearing. Skin exposure may cause dryness, redness, or a rash, especially when the product remains on the skin or is applied repeatedly.

Some counterfeit, contaminated, or unusual products may contain methanol, a particularly toxic alcohol. Methanol poisoning can initially cause mild symptoms, followed hours later by worsening headache, vomiting, rapid breathing, confusion, or blurred vision. Suspected methanol exposure requires urgent medical assessment.

- Burning or irritation in the mouth and throat
- Nausea, vomiting, or stomach pain
- Dizziness, poor balance, or slurred speech
- Unusual sleepiness or confusion
- Headache

- Slow or shallow breathing
- Low blood pressure, weakness, or fainting
- Low body temperature

Causes and risk factors

The most common cause is swallowing aftershave. This may happen when a child finds an open bottle or when the liquid has been transferred into an unmarked cup or drink container. Some people may swallow alcohol-containing personal care products when beverage alcohol is unavailable.

Factors that may increase the risk or severity include:

A person's appearance shortly after exposure may not predict what will happen. Alcohol can continue to be absorbed from the stomach, and symptoms may worsen over time.

Aftershave should remain in its original, labeled container with the cap secured. Store it out of sight and reach of children. Do not place it in a beverage bottle, cup, or food container.

- Young age or low body weight
- Swallowing a concentrated or large amount
- Exposure to a product containing isopropyl alcohol or another toxic alcohol
- Taking sedatives, opioid pain medicines, sleep medicines, or other substances that slow breathing
- Medical conditions that affect breathing, blood sugar, or the body's ability to process alcohol
- Delayed access to poison-control advice or medical care
- Intentional ingestion related to self-harm or an alcohol use disorder

Diagnosis

Clinicians diagnose aftershave poisoning by reviewing the exposure and checking how the person is functioning. Helpful information includes the product name, ingredients, container size, possible amount swallowed, time of exposure, symptoms, and the person's age and approximate weight.

Bring the original container to the emergency department if it is safe to do so. A photograph of the front and ingredient labels may also help. Do not delay emergency care while searching for

the bottle or trying to calculate an exact amount.

The medical team may check breathing, heart rate, blood pressure, temperature, alertness, and blood sugar. Depending on the situation, testing may include:

Not every exposure requires all of these tests. Poison-control specialists and emergency clinicians use the product ingredients, symptoms, and examination to decide what monitoring is appropriate.

Other conditions can resemble alcohol poisoning, including head injury, stroke, low blood sugar, medication overdose, and infection. Clinicians may evaluate for these possibilities when the history is uncertain or the symptoms do not match the reported exposure.

- Blood glucose and electrolyte levels
- Kidney and liver function tests
- Measurements of acidity in the blood
- Ethanol, methanol, or isopropyl alcohol levels when indicated
- Blood or urine ketone testing
- An electrocardiogram to assess heart rhythm

Treatment and management

Treatment depends on what was swallowed, how much may have been taken, and the person's symptoms.

Do not make the person vomit. Vomiting increases the risk that liquid will enter the lungs, particularly if the person is sleepy. Do not give home remedies, activated charcoal, or food and drink unless a poison specialist or clinician recommends it. Never give anything by mouth to someone who is not fully awake or cannot swallow normally.

For swallowed aftershave, contact a poison center right away. The specialist may recommend home observation for a small, low-risk exposure or direct the person to an emergency department. Follow the advice given for the specific product and circumstances.

For eye exposure, remove contact lenses if this can be done easily and rinse the eye with clean, lukewarm running water for 15 to 20 minutes. Avoid rubbing the eye or using medicated drops unless instructed. Contact Poison Control if pain, redness, tearing, or vision changes continue.

For skin exposure, remove contaminated clothing and wash the area with soap and water. Move to fresh air after significant vapor exposure if this can be done safely.

In a hospital, care may include close observation, repeated blood sugar checks, oxygen,

intravenous fluids, and treatment for nausea or low blood sugar. If breathing becomes dangerously slow, clinicians may support breathing with a tube and ventilator.

There is no specific antidote for ordinary ethanol or isopropyl alcohol poisoning. Most treatment supports the body's vital functions while the alcohol is cleared. Hemodialysis, which filters substances from the blood, is rarely needed for severe isopropyl alcohol poisoning but may be considered in exceptional cases.

Methanol poisoning is managed differently. Clinicians may give an antidote such as fomepizole to prevent the body from forming more toxic breakdown products. Hemodialysis may also be needed. These treatments require urgent hospital and toxicology supervision.

An intentional exposure should be addressed with the same medical urgency as an accidental poisoning. Once the person is medically stable, the care team can arrange mental health support, suicide-safety planning, or help for alcohol use.

Complications

Many small exposures recover without lasting problems when appropriate advice is obtained. More serious poisoning can lead to complications such as:

Prolonged pressure on muscles while unconscious can cause muscle breakdown. Severe methanol poisoning may damage the optic nerves, leading to vision loss, and can cause a dangerous buildup of acid in the blood.

Eye irritation usually improves after thorough rinsing. Continuing pain, light sensitivity, or blurred vision may indicate injury to the eye's surface and needs medical assessment.

- Vomit entering the lungs, called aspiration
- Dangerously slow breathing or loss of consciousness
- Low blood sugar, especially in children
- Dehydration and abnormal electrolyte levels from repeated vomiting
- Low blood pressure and reduced blood flow to vital organs
- Seizures, injury from falling, or choking

Follow up

After home observation, follow the poison center's instructions about how long to watch for symptoms. Seek prompt medical advice if vomiting continues, alertness changes, balance

worsens, or new symptoms develop.

Emergency care is needed for difficulty breathing, a seizure, collapse, severe confusion, bluish or gray skin, inability to awaken, or suspected methanol exposure. Do not let a severely drowsy person "sleep it off" without professional advice.

After emergency treatment, routine follow-up may be recommended if there were abnormal blood tests, persistent stomach symptoms, eye irritation, or complications involving the lungs or nervous system. Attend any planned laboratory or clinical checks even if the person feels better.

Families can reduce future risk by keeping aftershave and other alcohol-containing products locked away in their original containers. Child-resistant caps lower risk but are not fully childproof.

If the ingestion was intentional or connected to alcohol use, follow-up should include compassionate mental health or substance-use care. Immediate help is appropriate if there are continuing thoughts of self-harm or concern about another ingestion.

Sources

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