CONDITION

Cologne poisoning

Learn how swallowing or being exposed to cologne can cause alcohol poisoning, what symptoms to watch for, and when to contact Poison Control or seek emergency care.

WHAT IT IS
Poisoning from harmful cologne ingredients

BODY SYSTEM
Whole body

MAIN SYMPTOMS
Nausea and vomiting, dizziness, unusual sleepiness or confusion, slow or difficult breathing

WHAT CAUSES IT
Swallowing alcohol and other cologne ingredients

HOW IT IS DIAGNOSED
Exposure history, physical examination, targeted blood tests

MAIN TREATMENT
Supportive care

CAN IT BE CURED?
Sometimes - depends on exposure severity

IS IT AN EMERGENCY?
Sometimes - if hard to wake or breathing poorly

LONG-TERM OUTLOOK
Most minor exposures resolve without lasting effects

Overview

Cologne poisoning happens when ingredients in cologne cause harmful effects in the body. It most often follows swallowing the product. Less commonly, problems can result from getting cologne in the eyes, breathing in a large amount of spray, or having prolonged skin exposure.

Most colognes contain a high concentration of alcohol, usually ethanol, mixed with water, fragrances, and other ingredients. Some products may contain different alcohols or chemical additives. The exact formula matters because products can vary.

A small taste may cause only mouth irritation or no symptoms. Larger amounts can produce alcohol intoxication, similar to drinking alcoholic beverages. However, cologne is not made for drinking, and its alcohol concentration may be high. The added fragrance ingredients and denaturants-chemicals used to make alcohol unsuitable for drinking-can also affect risk.

Children are especially vulnerable. Because of their smaller body size, an amount that seems small to an adult may have a greater effect. Alcohol can also cause dangerously low blood sugar in young children.

Any suspected swallowing of cologne should be discussed promptly with a poison center or medical professional. In the United States, Poison Help is available at 1-800-222-1222 . Do not wait for symptoms before calling. Poison specialists can assess the product, amount, person's age and weight, and time since exposure.

Call emergency services immediately if the person is difficult to wake, has trouble breathing, has a seizure, collapses, or cannot swallow safely.

Symptoms

Symptoms depend on the ingredients, amount, route of exposure, and the person's age and health. Effects from swallowing cologne may begin within minutes, although some problems can develop later.

Possible symptoms include:

The smell of alcohol does not show how serious the exposure is. Someone who smells strongly of cologne may have had only skin exposure, while a person with little odor may have swallowed a significant amount.

Low blood sugar can cause sweating, shakiness, unusual behavior, weakness, confusion, or seizures. Young children may become sleepy without showing the more familiar signs of intoxication seen in adults.

If cologne gets into the eyes, it may cause burning, redness, tearing, blurred vision, or sensitivity to light. Spray inhalation can irritate the nose, throat, or lungs and may cause coughing or breathing discomfort. Skin exposure usually causes local irritation, dryness, or a rash rather than whole-body poisoning.

Seek emergency help now if the person:

Place an unconscious but breathing person on their side to reduce the risk of choking. Do not put anything in their mouth.

- Burning or irritation of the mouth and throat
- Nausea, vomiting, or stomach pain
- An alcohol-like smell on the breath
- Dizziness, poor balance, or slurred speech

- Unusual sleepiness, confusion, or agitation
- Headache
- Low body temperature
- Slow, irregular, or shallow breathing
- Low blood pressure or a fast heart rate
- Low blood sugar, especially in young children
- Seizures, loss of consciousness, or coma in severe cases
- Is hard to wake or is not responding normally
- Has slow, irregular, or difficult breathing
- Has a seizure
- Collapses or cannot stand safely
- Has repeated vomiting with increasing drowsiness
- Develops severe confusion or unusual behavior
- May have intentionally swallowed cologne to cause self-harm

Causes and risk factors

Swallowing cologne is the main cause of poisoning. Accidental exposures often occur when a child finds an open bottle or when cologne is stored in a drink container. Adults may swallow it because of confusion, substance use, limited access to beverage alcohol, or an attempt at self-harm.

Risk is influenced by:

Infants and young children have a higher risk of low blood sugar. Older adults and people with liver disease may clear alcohol more slowly. Sedatives, opioid pain medicines, sleep medicines, and other substances that reduce alertness can worsen breathing problems when combined with alcohol.

A product from an uncertain source may not have reliable labeling. Counterfeit, homemade, or improperly manufactured products could contain alcohols other than ethanol, such as methanol. Methanol is especially dangerous because it can damage vision and cause severe changes in the body's acid balance. These exposures require urgent medical assessment.

Spraying cologne in a small, poorly ventilated space may irritate the airways. People with asthma or other lung conditions may be more sensitive to strong fragrances, although this is

different from poisoning caused by swallowing the product.

- The amount swallowed
- The product's alcohol concentration and other ingredients
- The person's age, weight, and overall health
- Whether other alcohol, medicines, or drugs were also taken
- Whether vomiting occurred and liquid entered the lungs
- How much time has passed since exposure

Diagnosis

Cologne poisoning is evaluated using the exposure history, the product label, symptoms, and a physical examination. There is no single test that applies to every case.

A poison specialist or clinician may ask:

Keep the bottle or take a clear photograph of its label. Do not delay emergency care to search for the container.

In a medical setting, clinicians may check breathing, heart rate, blood pressure, temperature, alertness, and coordination. A bedside blood glucose test is particularly important for children and anyone with altered awareness.

Depending on the circumstances, testing may include blood alcohol concentration, electrolytes, kidney function, and measures of the body's acid-base balance. If the ingredients are uncertain or a toxic alcohol is possible, clinicians may order additional blood tests. Intentional or unexplained ingestion may require testing for other common poisons.

Symptoms resembling alcohol intoxication can also be caused by head injury, infection, stroke, low blood sugar, or medicine overdose. Clinicians consider these possibilities rather than assuming cologne is the only cause.

- What is the exact product name?
- What ingredients and alcohol concentration are listed?
- How much may be missing?
- When did the exposure happen?
- Was the product swallowed, inhaled, spilled on skin, or put in the eyes?
- What symptoms are present?

- Were alcohol, medicines, or other substances also involved?

Treatment and management

The first step is to contact Poison Control or a medical professional. Product-specific advice is important because colognes do not all have the same formula.

Do not make the person vomit. Vomiting increases the chance that liquid will enter the lungs. Do not give coffee, take a cold shower, or encourage walking as ways to "sober up." These measures do not speed alcohol removal and may cause injury.

If the person is fully awake and able to swallow, gently wipe or rinse cologne from the mouth. Ask Poison Control whether a small amount of water is appropriate. Do not give food or liquid to someone who is drowsy, vomiting repeatedly, having a seizure, or having trouble swallowing.

For eye exposure, remove contact lenses if this is easy and rinse the eye with clean, lukewarm water for 15 to 20 minutes. Avoid rubbing the eye. Contact Poison Control or seek medical advice if pain, redness, light sensitivity, or blurred vision continues.

For skin exposure, remove soaked clothing and wash the skin with soap and water. Move to fresh air after heavy spray inhalation. Breathing symptoms that do not improve promptly need medical assessment.

Hospital treatment is supportive, meaning clinicians protect the body while it clears the substance. Care may include:

Activated charcoal usually does not bind alcohols well and can increase aspiration risk in a sleepy person. It should not be used at home.

An antidote used for toxic alcohols may be considered if methanol or another dangerous alcohol is suspected. It is not routine treatment for ordinary ethanol exposure. Rarely, severe toxic-alcohol poisoning may require dialysis, which filters harmful substances from the blood.

If the exposure was intentional, treatment should also include a confidential mental health and safety assessment.

- Monitoring breathing, heart rhythm, blood pressure, and alertness
- Checking and correcting low blood sugar
- Giving oxygen or breathing support when needed
- Providing fluids and treating significant electrolyte problems
- Managing seizures, low body temperature, or complications from vomiting

- Observing until symptoms and laboratory abnormalities improve

Complications

Most minor exposures resolve without lasting effects when appropriate advice is followed. More serious poisoning can lead to complications.

Severe intoxication may suppress breathing or cause coma. Vomit can enter the lungs, leading to airway blockage or aspiration pneumonia. Poor balance and reduced judgment may result in falls, head injuries, or other accidents.

Low blood sugar can injure the brain if it is severe or prolonged. This is an important concern in infants and young children. Other possible problems include dehydration, abnormal body temperature, low blood pressure, and disturbances in the body's acid balance.

Persistent eye irritation can occasionally injure the surface of the eye. Toxic alcohols in mislabeled or counterfeit products can cause more serious complications, including vision loss, kidney injury, or damage to the nervous system.

Follow up

Follow the observation instructions given by Poison Control or the treating clinician. A person who remains completely well after a minor exposure may need only home monitoring, but this decision should be based on the product and circumstances.

After medical treatment, routine follow-up may be recommended if there was aspiration, an abnormal blood test, ongoing stomach symptoms, an eye injury, or a significant underlying health condition. Children should return to their usual alertness, eating, drinking, and activity level.

Seek prompt reassessment if vomiting continues, coughing or fever develops after vomiting, eye symptoms persist, or the person remains unusually tired, unsteady, or confused.

Call emergency services for new breathing difficulty, a seizure, collapse, inability to wake the person, or rapidly worsening symptoms.

Store cologne in its original labeled container, tightly closed and out of children's sight and reach. Do not transfer it into a cup, water bottle, or food container. If intentional ingestion occurred, follow-up should address emotional safety, access to harmful substances, and ongoing mental health support.

Sources

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