CONDITION

Hair spray poisoning

Hair spray poisoning is illness caused by swallowing hair spray, breathing concentrated fumes, or getting the product in the eyes.

WHAT IT IS
Harmful exposure to hair spray ingredients

BODY SYSTEM
Lungs, nervous system, eyes, skin, and digestive system

MAIN SYMPTOMS
Cough, eye irritation, nausea, dizziness

WHAT CAUSES IT
Swallowing, breathing, or spraying hair product into eyes

HOW IT IS DIAGNOSED
Exposure history, examination, and targeted tests

MAIN TREATMENT
Supportive care and poison-centre guidance

CAN IT BE CURED?
Yes - effects usually resolve with care

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

LONG-TERM OUTLOOK
Full recovery is common after mild, brief exposure

Overview

Hair spray poisoning means harmful effects caused by exposure to hair spray. Exposure can happen after swallowing the product, breathing a large amount of spray or vapour, or spraying it into the eyes. Intentional inhalation to feel intoxicated can cause severe poisoning.

Hair sprays contain a mixture of ingredients. These may include alcohol-based solvents, fragrances, hair-holding polymers, and compressed propellants. The exact ingredients differ between products. Aerosol sprays can create more inhalation risk than pump sprays, especially in a small space with poor ventilation.

A brief accidental spray near the face often causes only temporary irritation. More serious effects are possible after a large exposure, deliberate inhalation, or vomiting followed by liquid entering the lungs. Young children may be exposed after finding an unsecured bottle or

aerosol can.

The product is also flammable until its vapours have dispersed. Keep it away from cigarettes, flames, sparks, and hot surfaces during and after use.

Symptoms

Symptoms depend on the product, the amount, how the exposure happened, and how long it lasted.

Breathing concentrated spray or vapour may cause:

Hydrocarbon propellants can affect the heart and nervous system when deliberately inhaled in high concentrations. This may lead to an abnormal heart rhythm, seizure, collapse, or cardiac arrest. These effects can happen suddenly.

Swallowing hair spray may cause burning or irritation in the mouth and throat, nausea, vomiting, stomach pain, sleepiness, or poor coordination. A major concern is aspiration , which means liquid or vomit enters the lungs instead of the stomach. Aspiration can inflame the lungs and make breathing difficult.

Hair spray in the eyes can cause stinging, redness, watering, and blurred vision. Skin contact may cause dryness or irritation, particularly after prolonged exposure or in people with sensitive skin.

Some breathing complications do not appear immediately. A worsening cough, fever, chest pain, unusual tiredness, or shortness of breath in the hours after swallowing or choking on hair spray needs prompt medical advice.

- Coughing, choking, or throat irritation
- Headache, dizziness, or feeling unusually sleepy
- Nausea
- Wheezing, chest discomfort, or shortness of breath
- Confusion, poor coordination, or loss of consciousness after severe exposure

Causes and risk factors

Hair spray poisoning is caused by toxic or irritating effects from the product's ingredients. The route of exposure matters.

Common situations include accidentally spraying the face, using a large amount in an

unventilated room, swallowing the product, or puncturing an aerosol container. Deliberately breathing fumes from a can, bag, or soaked material is especially dangerous because it delivers a concentrated dose and reduces available oxygen.

Factors that may increase the chance of harm include:

Different brands use different ingredients. The label, container, and product safety information can help a poison centre assess the risk.

- Exposure in a small, enclosed, or poorly ventilated space
- Swallowing more than a taste or small accidental amount
- Choking or vomiting after swallowing the product
- Asthma or another lung condition
- Exposure involving a young child
- Repeated workplace exposure without suitable ventilation
- Deliberate inhalation or repeated inhalant use

Diagnosis

There is no single test that confirms every case of hair spray poisoning. Diagnosis is usually based on what happened, the product involved, symptoms, and a physical examination.

A poison specialist or healthcare professional may ask about the product name, whether it was an aerosol or pump spray, the route of exposure, the estimated amount, and when it happened. They may also ask whether vomiting, choking, deliberate inhalation, or loss of consciousness occurred.

In hospital, assessment may include measuring oxygen level, breathing rate, heart rate, blood pressure, and temperature. An electrocardiogram, or ECG, records the heart's electrical activity and may be used after a significant inhalation exposure.

Blood tests may check oxygen balance, salts, blood sugar, kidney function, or other problems. A chest X-ray may be needed if aspiration or lung injury is suspected, although early images can sometimes look normal. More specialised tests are reserved for serious cases or ongoing breathing problems.

Treatment and management

Treatment depends on the route and severity of exposure. There is no general antidote for hair

spray poisoning. Care focuses on stopping exposure, protecting breathing and circulation, and treating symptoms.

After breathing spray or vapour, move into fresh air if this can be done safely. Do not enter an enclosed area filled with aerosol if doing so would expose you. Ventilate the room and avoid flames, cigarettes, or electrical sparks.

If hair spray enters the eyes, remove contact lenses if they come out easily and rinse the eyes with clean, lukewarm water. Continue gentle rinsing for 15 to 20 minutes. Do not put other chemicals or eye drops into the eye unless a healthcare professional recommends them.

For skin exposure, remove wet clothing and wash the skin with soap and water.

If hair spray is swallowed, do not make the person vomit. Vomiting can increase the chance of product entering the lungs. Do not give anything by mouth to someone who is very sleepy, having a seizure, or struggling to swallow. Contact a poison centre for advice based on the exact product and circumstances.

Hospital treatment may include oxygen, breathing support, intravenous fluids, treatment for seizures, and monitoring of the heart. People with suspected aspiration may be observed for developing lung symptoms. Antibiotics like amoxicillin or doxycycline are not routinely useful for chemical irritation alone, but they may be considered if a separate bacterial infection develops.

Take the container or a clear photograph of its label when seeking care, if this is safe. Do not delay emergency help to search for it.

Complications

Most small accidental exposures cause temporary irritation and settle without lasting harm. Complications are more likely after a large exposure, aspiration, or deliberate inhalation.

Possible complications include:

Repeated inhalant misuse can affect memory, coordination, mood, the heart, and other organs. It can also lead to a substance use disorder, meaning continued use despite harm or difficulty stopping. A single episode of deliberate inhalation can still be life-threatening.

- Chemical pneumonitis: inflammation of the lungs after liquid is inhaled
- Low blood oxygen or respiratory failure
- Abnormal heart rhythms
- Seizures, coma, or cardiac arrest

- Eye-surface injury after prolonged contact
- Burns or trauma if flammable spray ignites

Prevention

Many accidental exposures can be prevented, although not every incident is avoidable.

Use hair spray in a well-ventilated area and avoid deliberately breathing the mist. Follow the label's directions. Keep aerosol sprays away from heat, flames, cigarettes, and sparks, and do not puncture or burn the container.

Store hair spray out of children's sight and reach. A high or locked cupboard is safer than a bathroom counter, handbag, or low drawer. Keep the product in its original labelled container rather than transferring it to another bottle.

If hair spray is used regularly at work, good room ventilation and workplace safety procedures can reduce repeated exposure. Report ongoing cough, wheezing, headaches, or eye irritation through the appropriate workplace health process.

Deliberate inhalation cannot be made safe by using a smaller amount, opening a window, or avoiding certain brands. If you or someone close to you is using aerosols to become intoxicated, confidential medical and substance-use support is available.

Living with it and what to expect

After a mild exposure, eye, throat, or skin irritation often improves after the product is removed and the area is rinsed or ventilated. Dizziness or headache from a brief inhalation exposure should improve in fresh air. A poison centre can advise whether home observation is reasonable.

After swallowing, choking, or a larger inhalation exposure, symptoms may need monitoring for several hours. Lung irritation can develop or worsen after the initial event. Follow the discharge instructions you receive and return for care if breathing symptoms appear or increase.

Most people who recover from a brief accidental exposure do not need long-term treatment. Follow-up may be advised after significant lung injury, an abnormal heart rhythm, persistent eye symptoms, or a stay in intensive care.

Repeated occupational irritation may continue while exposure continues. Changes in ventilation, work practices, or product handling may be needed.

Recovery after deliberate or repeated inhalant use is less predictable because different

products and patterns of use cause different injuries. Medical follow-up may include heart, lung, or nervous-system assessment. Support for inhalant use can reduce the risk of another episode without blaming or judging the person involved.

When to get medical help

Call emergency services now if the exposed person:

Move away from fumes if it is safe, but do not put yourself at risk. Do not give food or drink to someone who is unconscious or having difficulty swallowing.

Contact a poison centre promptly after swallowing hair spray, a large inhalation exposure, or any exposure involving symptoms. In the United States, Poison Control is available at 1-800-222-1222 and through webPOISONCONTROL. Elsewhere, use your national poison-information service or urgent medical service.

Arrange urgent medical assessment for a cough that worsens after swallowing, fever, shortness of breath, chest pain, repeated vomiting, ongoing drowsiness, or persistent blurred vision or eye pain.

Routine follow-up is appropriate if mild symptoms are not settling as expected, workplace exposure keeps causing irritation, or you have been advised to have your lungs, heart, or eyes rechecked. It is also appropriate to seek confidential support for repeated or intentional inhalant use, even when there are no current emergency symptoms.

- Has trouble breathing, blue or grey lips, or severe wheezing
- Collapses, cannot be awakened, or is very confused
- Has a seizure
- Develops chest pain or a fast or irregular heartbeat
- Deliberately inhaled hair spray to become intoxicated
- Was exposed in a fire or explosion

Common questions

Is hair spray poisonous if I breathe in a little?

A small accidental breath of spray in a ventilated room usually causes no symptoms or brief throat irritation, coughing, headache, or dizziness. Move to fresh air and stop using the product. Seek advice if symptoms continue, worsen, or include breathing difficulty.

What should I do if my child swallowed hair spray?

Do not make your child vomit. Remove the product, wipe out the mouth if needed, and contact a poison centre with the container nearby. Call emergency services if your child is unusually sleepy, choking, having a seizure, or struggling to breathe.

Can hair spray damage my lungs?

It can. Concentrated mist may irritate the airways, while swallowed liquid or vomit entering the lungs can cause chemical pneumonitis. A worsening cough, chest pain, fever, or shortness of breath after exposure needs prompt assessment.

Is aerosol hair spray more dangerous than pump spray?

Aerosol products use pressurised propellants and can create a fine mist that is easy to inhale. Both types may irritate the eyes or be harmful if swallowed. Risk comes from the ingredients, amount, route of exposure, and ventilation.

Can you get high from hair spray?

Some people may feel intoxicated after deliberately inhaling aerosol propellants or solvents. This is not safe. It can cause sudden abnormal heart rhythms, lack of oxygen, seizures, unconsciousness, or death, even during a single episode.

How long do symptoms last?

Minor irritation often improves after rinsing or moving into fresh air. The timing after a larger exposure is less predictable, and lung symptoms may emerge over several hours. Follow poison-centre or medical advice rather than relying only on how the person feels immediately afterward.

Sources

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