

UPDATE ON POPPERS

Although poppers have been around for decades, information about their health risks has not always been consistent or accurate. Urban myths, deceptive retail ads and outdated research may confuse individuals about the actual facts.

In a recent local survey of men who have sex with men, *nearly three-quarters (72%) said gay men need better information about poppers, and 42% would go to their health care provider for that information.*

This fact sheet summarizes the latest clinical and behavioral research on poppers. Public Health encourages providers to talk openly with their patients and clients about sex and drug use, including poppers, and to use this fact sheet to inform and guide those conversations.

What are poppers?

Poppers are a liquid form of nitrites. They are widely sold as “video head cleaner” or “leather cleaner” on the Internet and in sex shops. Although men sometimes use poppers for dancing or other activities, they most often use them during sex, inhaling the fumes to enhance orgasm, prolong sex, or relax anal muscles for easier penetration. After a quick rush, they may feel light headed, nauseous, or flushed. The high and intensified sexual effects last only a few minutes, which leads some men to sniff poppers frequently or repeatedly during sex.

Can you get addicted to poppers?

Poppers are not physically addictive, but people can develop tolerance. After frequent use, however, some men feel psychologically dependent on poppers to have or enjoy sex.

Health Impacts of Poppers

Moderate use

- severe headache
- throat irritation
- nose bleed
- nausea
- faintness
- reduced breathing & heart rate
- burns or blistering

As use increases, short-term effects may get worse or last longer.

Chronic use

- weight loss
- mouth or nasal sores
- impaired smell
- lung damage
- anemia
- impaired ability to think

Poppers can increase internal eye pressure and should not be used by people with glaucoma.

Can you overdose on poppers?

Fatal overdoses are rare. But, inhaling too much or too often can lower blood pressure and cause unconsciousness or heart attack. This risk increases significantly when poppers are used with erectile dysfunction (ED) drugs. Together, these drugs can cause a severe drop in blood pressure and heart failure.

Several deaths have occurred from co-using poppers and Viagra.

KEY MESSAGES

- **Be cautious about information on the Internet.** Websites that sell poppers are not accurate sources of health information.
- **The best choice for your overall health is to not use poppers,** especially if you have HIV. They are not approved for any human use or regulated for purity.

If you use poppers:

- **Try using less or less often** to reduce harmful effects.
- **Pace yourself.** Don't take whiffs more often than every few minutes.
- **Do not use poppers with erectile dysfunction drugs or party drugs** like GHB, ecstasy or crystal.
- If poppers trigger you to have unprotected sex, **put a strategy in place before** you take the first whiff. Have condoms and lube handy to use.
- **Think about your use.** How bad are the side effects? How do you feel about the role of poppers in your sex life? Do you wish it could be different? If you want to make a change, talk with someone you trust.

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In rare cases, large doses of poppers can cause methemoglobinemia, a potentially fatal reduction in the blood's ability to carry oxygen. Swallowing poppers can be lethal.

Do poppers damage the immune system?

Some research has shown that poppers weaken parts of the immune system. However, many of these results are controversial since studies:

1. only tested mice or cells outside the body,
2. often administered poppers at higher doses and for longer periods than typical human use, and
3. failed to control for other factors in the study design.

Some of these same studies also found that immune function improved within days of stopping use. Therefore the short- and long-term immune impacts are still a matter of scientific debate.

Do poppers cause Kaposi's sarcoma (KS) or other cancers?

Poppers do **not** cause KS. This theory from the early AIDS epidemic has long been disproved. KS is caused by the HHV-8 virus (*human herpesvirus, type 8, also known as Kaposi's sarcoma virus*). Using poppers, however, may facilitate the sexual transmission of HHV-8 through unprotected sex.

Poppers do not **cause** any cancers, but animal studies suggest they may be linked to faster growth of tumor cells. Rather than stimulating cancer cells directly, poppers may suppress certain immune functions that help kill tumor cells and slow cancer growth.

How do poppers affect HIV disease?

Poppers do not seem to impact viral replication or interact with HIV anti-retroviral medications. Chronic poppers use, however, may affect one's ability to adhere to drug regimens and thus promote drug resistance. Protease inhibitors increase blood levels of erectile dysfunction drugs. So it's even more **dangerous for people on protease inhibitors to use ED drugs and poppers at the same time.**

Are you more likely to get HIV if you use poppers?

Research studies consistently find poppers use to be independently associated with acquiring HIV or an STD. Not all men who use poppers have unprotected sex. But for some, poppers may lower sexual inhibition, impair judgment or make it more difficult to feel small tears in anal tissue during longer, rougher sex.

What Should Providers Do?

1. **Correct misinformation.**
Ask patients/clients what they know about poppers.
"This week I'm talking with all of my patients/clients about poppers. What have you heard about how poppers affect health?"
2. **Talk openly with patients and clients about their use.**
"What's your use been like over the last few months?"
"How do feel about your poppers use?"
"What do you like about poppers? What don't you like?"
3. **Reinforce the Key Messages.**
4. **Educate about the risks of using poppers with erectile dysfunction drugs** – especially HIV-positive men who take protease inhibitors.

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