WHAT IS PEPPER SPRAY?

It is a spray containing oleoresin capsicum (OC) as the major active ingredient. OC is a mixture of several compounds including capsaicin, an extract of chili peppers. Pepper spray is used as a riot control agent by law enforcement to temporarily incapacitate individuals by causing intense irritation of mucous membranes of the eyes, nose, throat, lungs, and skin (1).

Pepper spray is intended to be used by spraying the face of a person at a distance of 3-4 meters.

INTERNATIONAL STANDARDS

The European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment states that pepper spray should not be used against persons already under control, should never be used in confined places, and that certain measures need to be in place when it is used in open spaces, such as instant access to a medical doctor (2).

When pepper spray is not used to achieve a legitimate aim, the use may amount to ill-treatment, and perhaps even torture depending on the context (3).

IN PRACTICE

Pepper spray is primarily used for law enforcement purposes such as arrest or restraint of individuals and for riot control purposes. Pepper spray is increasingly used in detention facilities and, in some countries, for self-defense by private individuals.

When pepper spray is used in accordance with the manufacturers’ guidelines and in line with international human rights and use of force standards, it can provide an alternative to more violent methods of force, such as electric discharge weapons and firearms. When pepper spray is used in spaces where people cannot disperse, it can lead to serious injury or death, particularly among vulnerable individuals, such as individuals on drugs, individuals with diseases like asthma and/or obese persons (4,5).

HEALTH CONSEQUENCES

Exposure to pepper spray can cause injury to different organ systems and even death.

The prevalence of serious medical outcomes and requirement for medical evaluation in pepper spray exposures has been found to range between 2.7% - 15% (1).

The severity of the health effects from pepper spray exposure depends on the circumstances of the exposure and several product, dispersal, and victim-related factors such as co-ingestants by the victim, chronic disease state, and the ability to promptly and thoroughly irrigate the exposed areas.

**Ocular effects:** Exposure to pepper spray results in immediate eye pain, loss of blink reflex, lacrimation (tears), reduced visual acuity, neurogenic inflammation, unresponsiveness to chemical and mechanical stimuli and ocular injuries such as corneal erosions abrasions, and ulcers (1,6).

**Dermal effects:** Dermal exposure to pepper spray produces intense burning pain, tingling, edema, erythema, rash and blisters (1,6).

**Respiratory effects:** Shortness of breath, cough, chest tightness, wheezing, pulmonary edema, and bronchospasm (1,6).

CONCLUSIONS

To prevent further injury and/or complications in physical wellbeing, policies must state explicitly procedures for care of persons exposed, and law enforcement should have explicit guidelines specifying the steps to be taken after a person is exposed and subdued (7).

Lack of epidemiological studies on pepper spray’s health effects hinders medical understanding of long-term effects and the development of treatment plans. Therefore, more research is needed to guide legal authorities and health professionals to the best potential treatment options (7).
REFERENCES


2. European Committee for the Prevention of Torture and Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, Report on visit to Bosnia and Herzegovina, Doc. DPT/Inf (2009), §79


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