

# Study investigates risk of hazardous events for patients who can't smell

April 10 2014, by Frances Dumenci

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(Medical Xpress)—From the next room, you smell something burning in the kitchen. Rushing in, you see a smoking pot left on the stove. You quickly turn off the burner, averting a more serious situation. But what if you couldn't smell?

Your sense of smell is critical to alerting you to potentially hazardous

situations. Thousands of Americans experience loss of smell or taste each year resulting from head trauma, sinus disease, normal aging and neurologic disorders, such as brain injury, stroke and Alzheimer's disease.

In a new study by researchers from the Smell and Taste Clinic at Virginia Commonwealth University, more than three decades of patient data (1983-2013) was analyzed to investigate the overall risk, modifiers of risk, and trends in hazardous events experienced by patients with impaired olfactory function. The findings showed that the incidence of hazardous events progressively increased with the degree of smell impairment.

"The ability to smell contributes to the quality of life and provides important sensory information that warns us about potentially hazardous situations," said Richard Costanzo, Ph.D., professor of Physiology and Biophysics in the VCU School of Medicine and director of research in the Department of Otolaryngology – Head and Neck Surgery.

"Individuals with olfactory impairments – those who can't smell – are three times more likely to experience an olfactory-related hazardous event, such as undetected smoke or gas leak, burning pans or ingestion of toxic substances or spoiled food, compared to individuals with normal smell function."

The study found that certain factors were linked to higher risk, including age, gender and race. It also found that the overall incidence of hazardous events has not changed significantly in the past 30 years.

"This study underscores the importance of counseling patients on the risks associated with olfactory impairment since the risk of hazardous events has not decreased over the past three decades," Costanzo said.

"Our findings suggest that by providing focused risk counseling to olfactory-impaired patients, [health care providers](#) may help reduce an

individual's personal risk to hazardous events."

The study and its findings will be presented at the Association for Chemoreception Sciences (AChemS) 36th Annual Meeting this week. About 500 scientists are gathering at the meeting in Bonita Springs, Fla. to present new information on the role of [smell](#) and taste in disease, nutrition and social interactions in humans as well as animals.

Provided by Virginia Commonwealth University

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