

People are dying, going blind after drinking hand sanitizer, CDC warns

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(HealthDay)—Federal health officials have been warning for weeks that

illegal forms of hand sanitizer containing toxic methanol are being sold across the United States.

Now, new data from Arizona and New Mexico illustrate the danger: During the months of May and June, 15 people were rushed to hospital after drinking [hand sanitizer](#) containing methanol.

Four of them died and three went blind or lost at least some vision, reported researchers led by Dr. Luke Yip of the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's COVID-19 Response Team.

"Swallowing alcohol-based [hand sanitizer](#) products containing methanol can cause life-threatening methanol poisoning," Yip's group warned, and although the 15 victims in this report were all adults, children might be endangered, too.

"Young children might unintentionally swallow these products," the study authors warned, and of course, teens and adults might drink hand sanitizer as a cheap way to get drunk.

Drinking any form of hand sanitizer can be dangerous, the CDC team said, because the recommended level of alcohol in these preparations is between 60% and 95%. But recommended hand sanitizers contain either ethanol or isopropanol.

Methanol, otherwise known as methyl alcohol, is a much more toxic form of alcohol. As early as June 19 the U.S. Food and Drug Administration sent out warnings to the public that a host of illegal hand sanitizers with methanol were being sold.

Of course, any alcohol poisoning can bring on serious symptoms. But methanol is poisonous, explained emergency physician Dr. Robert Glatter, of Lenox Hill Hospital in New York City.

"Its metabolites, formaldehyde and [formic acid](#), result in a condition known as metabolic acidosis—a dangerous accumulation of acid in the bloodstream," he explained. "This is toxic to the organs and tissues in the body, leading to seizures, kidney failure, blindness, [low blood pressure](#) and fatal cardiac arrhythmias."

The study authors concurred. "If left untreated, methanol poisoning can be fatal," they said.

In the 15 cases reported in Arizona and New Mexico during May and June, all of the patients were taken to the hospital after drinking methanol-based hand sanitizers. Thirteen were men and they averaged between 21 and 65 years of age.

In one case, a 44-year-old man told doctors that he had been "drinking an unknown quantity of alcohol-based hand sanitizer during the few days before seeking medical care," according to the report. High blood levels of methanol were discovered, and he began to have seizures.

After six days of drug therapy and dialysis the man eventually recovered and was discharged, but "with near-total vision loss," Yip's team reported.

The researchers, along with the CDC and FDA, are urging Americans to check their brand of hand sanitizer against this list: [FDA Updates on Hand Sanitizers Consumers Should Not Use](#).

If your hand sanitizer shows up on the list, "its use should be discontinued immediately, and the product should be disposed of in hazardous waste containers; these products should not be flushed down a toilet or poured down a drain," the researchers said.

They stressed that the hospitalizations outlined in the study occurred

after people drank the hand sanitizers—methanol poisoning via skin absorption is rare. But Glatter said even skin exposure could harm kids.

"Children are most at risk if they ingest it, but also if they rub it on their skin or inhale it," he said. "Any child exposed to [methanol](#) needs to be immediately evaluated in the emergency department."

And Glatter reminded Americans that hand sanitizer is always second to hand-washing when it comes to staying clear of the new [coronavirus](#).

"With the ongoing risk related to tainted hand sanitizer, it may be advisable to stick with something we know works well: washing your hands vigorously with soap and water for 20 seconds," he said.

The findings were reported Aug. 5 in the CDC journal *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*.

More information: The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has more on the [new coronavirus](#).

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