Pepper Spray Exposure, Treatment of

Pepper spray is an irritant which is used in self-defense weapons by both civilians and law enforcement. These irritants are commonly described as “less than lethal”. This means they are intended to put a person out of action by causing pain, burning and irritation of exposed membranes. Examples of exposed membranes are the lining of your nose mouth and around and in your eyes. They are not intended to kill or cause permanent injury. Pepper spray or oleoresin capsicum (OC) is one of the common irritants used. A derivative of hot peppers, OC is the active ingredient in pepper spray.

SYMPTOMS

- Severe burning sensation in the eyes, nose and mouth.
- Difficulty breathing.

DIAGNOSIS

The diagnosis of this problem is usually made by getting the history of what has happened. It may also be suggested on your caregiver's examination.

TREATMENT

- Usually the most important part of treatment is getting rid of contaminated clothes. The eyes should also be washed with large amounts of water. This is called decontamination.
- If clothes have been contaminated, do not resume wearing them until after washing as they may re-expose you to the problem-causing chemical. Many fabrics hold on to the chemical and cannot be re-worn but must be thrown out.

PROGNOSIS

Problems caused by pepper spray exposure are usually self-limiting. This means they do not require treatment beyond decontamination, and they will usually get better without further treatment.

SEEK IMMEDIATE MEDICAL CARE IF:

- You have increasing pain in your eyes, mouth, throat or any other areas exposed to the pepper spray.
- You develop difficulty breathing or you develop cough and or shortness of breath.
- You develop problems with your vision.
- You develop a rash or any other problem you think is related to the spray.

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