

H1N1's Unintended Effect: Sanitizer High

Addicts Abusing Hand Sanitizer after Product Flooded onto Store Shelves, Police and Social Groups Say



(iStockphoto)

(AP) It's an unintended consequence of the fight against germs during the recent outbreak of the H1N1 virus.

Police and social advocates say addicts are abusing hand sanitizer after the product flooded onto store shelves and into dispensers in most public buildings last year.

Sgt. Darrall Randy Kotchon, a Winnipeg police officer who works in a community support unit, said his officers have received reports that addicts are consuming the gel and have found a lot of discarded bottles of the stuff.

[CBSNews.com Special Report: H1N1](#)

Experts say people are adding salt to the sanitizer, which separates pure alcohol from the product with potentially dangerous results.

At one of the city's main shelters workers have confiscated sanitizer bottles and stopped leaving salt out on tables so people have to ask to use it.

"It's similar to individuals who are using sniff, or they're using mouthwash, or they're using hairspray," said Kotchon.

Reports of hand sanitizer abuse began last year, said police, when officers encountered the issue on patrol and from reports by residents. Business owners need to be particularly vigilant, he said.

"What unfortunately has happened is people are realizing this is something they can use to get drunk and intoxicated on," Kotchon said.

Brian Bechtel, executive director of Main Street Project, a city homeless shelter, said staff confiscated four jugs of sanitizer this week alone. Some clients steal sanitizer from public places, he said, though staff members are now seizing more consumer bottles.

"It seems like it's almost daily now," said Bechtel.

Staff decided to use non-alcoholic sanitizer at the shelter to discourage misuse.

A Senate committee heard last June that federal health officials discussed whether to send hand sanitizer to some remote First Nations battling the H1N1 flu.

An official said alcohol in the sanitizer was a concern.

Kotchon said no charges have been laid against shop owners for selling the hand sanitizers to addicts.

Heidi Graham, a Winnipeg Regional Health Authority spokeswoman, said dispensers are locked to stop people from stealing the liquid. Several health facilities have grappled with sanitizer theft, she said.

"We try and place the dispensers in high-traffic areas only."

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