Fact Sheet

February 2011

Non-palatable (toxic) alcohol use

What is non-palatable alcohol?

Non-palatable alcohols are toxic substances that contain alcohol but are not intended for human consumption. The main types of non-palatable alcohols consumed are hand sanitizer, mouthwash and rubbing alcohol. In addition, while Chinese cooking wine is intended for use in cooking, it becomes toxic when consumed in large amounts.

Why is non-palatable alcohol dangerous?

The high concentrations of alcohol (e.g., in hand sanitizer and rubbing alcohol) as well as chemicals and additives (e.g., extremely high sodium content in Chinese cooking wine) make these products dangerous. If ingested, these substances can cause immediate and severe harm. Some types of alcohol (found in antifreeze or windshield washer fluid) are metabolized or converted into much more toxic alcohols in the body. Some people who are homeless or otherwise living in poverty may consume non-palatable alcohol because it is cheap, readily available, and produces intense intoxication. However, any amount of non-palatable alcohol use can have serious health effects.

What are the physical effects of ingesting non-palatable alcohol?

Signs of use include, but are not limited to, nausea, vomiting (including blood), abdominal pain, increased blood pressure, increased heart rate and breathing, seizures, dizziness, decreased awareness, inability to speak or move, clammy skin, convulsions, coma and death.

What to do if a client is extremely intoxicated?

Call 911 if a client is verbally unresponsive, unable to walk, or is experiencing temporary blindness, as these may be symptoms of non-palatable alcohol use.

Risk of fire

Some non-palatable alcohols (especially rubbing alcohol) are extremely flammable and can ignite quickly when exposed to flame. Tragically, some people have burned to death when non-palatable alcohol spilt on their clothing and was accidentally ignited by a cigarette.

Strategies for working with clients

- Initiate a non-judgmental, factual discussion about the harms of using these substances. Early intervention is important if your client is starting to experiment with or is an occasional user of non-palatable alcohols.
- Encourage the use of safer alcohols – beer, wine and liquor.
- Discuss the use of less harmful, non-palatable alcohols (e.g., mouthwash rather than hand sanitizer).
- Discuss options to reduce the amount of non-palatable alcohol consumed, and other strategies to reduce the potential for harm, including the following:
    - Plan ahead – eat before drinking, find a safe place to drink, and tell someone where you will be.
    - Drink with a friend or someone you trust.
    - Drink lots of water – alternate between alcoholic and non-alcohol drinks.

- Discuss options with clients (continued):
    - Pace yourself – avoid bingeing and know your limits.
    - Avoid using illicit drugs at the same time.
    - Be aware of the fire risks associated with rubbing alcohol (see above).
    - If you feel sick, get help immediately. Call 911 in an emergency.
- Keep checking in with your client and reinforce any positive change they are making.
- Consult with your supervisor or manager.
- Refer any homeless male clients to The Annex Harm Reduction Program at Seaton House.
- Refer to withdrawal management or other treatment services, when appropriate.
- Inform client of provincial legislation against the use of non-palatable alcohol, which can result in fines.

Important numbers and resources

- Dial 911 for all emergencies (police, fire, ambulance)
- Telehealth Ontario, 1-866-797-0000
- Ontario Poison Centre, 1-800-268-9017, poison.information@sickkids.ca
- The Annex Harm Reduction Program, Seaton House, 416-392-5522
- Drug and Alcohol Registry of Treatment, 1-800-565-8603 (24 hours), www.dart.ca
- Centre for Addiction & Mental Health , Emergency Department, 250 College Street, 416-535-8501, www.camh.net
- Withdrawal Management Central Access, 1-866-366-9513
- Toronto Health Connection, Toronto Public Health, Monday-Friday (8:30am-4:30pm), 416-338-7600