

## **Doc Talk**

### **What to do when the bear spray sprays you**

***by Nathan Levanger, D.O.***

We've heard silly stories about people who decided to use themselves or a "good friend" as a guinea pig for bear spray, or the practice blast that goes awry. With bear spray sales at an all-time high, it makes sense to know what to do if a human gets in the way of the spray.

Treat bear spray the same way you handle toxic materials. Keep cans out of the reach of children and always handle with caution.

Most bear sprays contain concentrated amounts of capsaicin, a powerful inflammatory agent derived primarily from chilies. Different brands may contain different additional solutions including a gas that is commonly used in tear gas. However, even tear gas generally contains capsaicin and the recommended first aid relief is about the same.

The first two – fifteen minutes bring uncontrollable coughing and strong upper body spasms that make it difficult to breathe or speak. Temporary blindness may last from 15 – 30 minutes. Exposed skin will feel an intense burning irritation. Relief from the symptoms should begin naturally after 45 to 60 minutes but there are a few things you can do to support the recovery process.

First of all, if the person is experiencing severe respiratory distress, send for medical help. People with asthma are at particular risk. Don't leave the person alone. To relieve respiratory effects, move the person to fresh air away and upwind from where the spraying occurred.

Don't rub the eyes or the skin. Splashing water on the affected areas won't help either, because pepper spray is oil-based, not water soluble. Rubbing simply pushes more spray into the skin or eyes, prolonging the agony. Blinking repeatedly will bring some eye relief if you are not close to water; flushing eyes with water for up to 30 minutes is recommended. For skin pain, remove contaminated clothing. Flush with mild soapy water for 20 – 20 minutes. Adding baby shampoo, milk, and lidocaine gels along with water have proven to be mildly effective.

Remain calm and remember that in most cases, relief will come with the passing of time.

Hopefully, you'll never have to use bear spray for its intended purpose. It's important to know how the trigger mechanism works and how to aim, but avoid using yourself or a buddy as a test dummy.\*\*\*\*\*