

## BACKGROUND

In Canada, the use of poppers among gay, bi and other men who have sex with men (sexual minority men) has been common in both nightlife and sexual contexts for several decades. They have the effect of relaxing smooth muscle tissues, which can facilitate sex for sexual minority men.

In the past, poppers were illegal to sell for consumption in Canada; however, they were available for purchase as products like room odorizers and leather cleaners, though they were rarely used for these purposes. This was a legal “gray area”.

In 2013, under Stephen Harper’s Conservative Government, Health Canada initiated enforcement of the ban on the sale of alkyl nitrite products. It is unclear why the crackdown was initiated in 2013, given little evidence pertaining to both the harms and benefits of poppers use, as well as the impact of the changed policies on poppers users.

Many people still use poppers in Canada in spite of the crackdown – in 2019, more than a quarter of men surveyed by CBRC’s National Sex Now Survey reported having used poppers in the last 6 months<sup>1</sup>. Survey data also suggest that there has been no appreciable decline in poppers use between the years 2012 and 2017, pointing to the ineffectiveness of the ban at curbing their use<sup>2</sup>.

## KEY MESSAGES

**The positive effects people experience from poppers use are legitimate.**

- People use poppers to enhance pleasure and improve their capacity to relax and enjoy sex.
- Poppers have a relevant health benefit, because they are an effective means of enabling safe and enjoyable anal sex, and reducing pain and injury during anal sex (e.g., from tears in anal tissue)<sup>3</sup>.
- There are no suitable alternative therapeutic goods/products available for these purposes.

**The harms of poppers use have generally been overstated.**

- Poppers have very little risk of dependency because they have no psychoactive effect (they do not cross the blood-brain barrier) and are not addictive<sup>4,5</sup>. Poppers are widely used but most people use them infrequently.
- The risk of ‘poppers maculopathy’ (poppers-related vision loss) is relatively low and appears to be linked to one specific form of poppers (isopropyl nitrite) that is difficult to identify in the current unregulated poppers market.
- Overdose is exceptionally rare. If overdose occurs, it can be effectively treated and reversed in hospital settings.

<sup>1</sup> Community Based Research Centre. (2020). SexNow survey data. Retrieved 2020 Aug 31 from <https://ourstats.ca/our-dashboard>

<sup>2</sup> Momentum data.

<sup>3</sup> Schwartz, C., Fast, D., & Knight, R. (2020). Poppers, queer sex and a Canadian crackdown: Examining the experiences of alkyl nitrite use among young sexual minority men. *International Journal of Drug Policy*. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2020.102670>

<sup>4</sup> Demant, D., & Oviedo-Trespalacios, O. (2019). Harmless? A hierarchical analysis of poppers use correlates among young gay and bisexual men. *Drug and Alcohol Review*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1111/dar.12958>

<sup>5</sup> Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs. (2016). ACMD review of alkyl nitrites (“poppers”).

**There is currently  
no safe supply  
of poppers  
in Canada.**



**Risks associated with  
poppers use can be  
minimized but current  
regulations are more  
likely to increase rather  
than decrease risk.**



- The current regulatory framework in Canada is producing significant uncertainty relating to the health effects of poppers use, with many poppers users describing challenges in procuring formulations of poppers that are safe.
- Despite the lack of safe supply, studies have shown that poppers use has not significantly decreased following the 2013 crackdown: approximately 30% of sexual minority men report using poppers in 2019, comparable to reported rates of use prior to the 2013 ban<sup>6</sup>.
- Given the fact that people are forced to buy poppers from untrusted and unregulated sources, the current policy on poppers is undermining the ability of poppers users to make safe and informed decisions about their health. It is therefore increasing rather than decreasing harms associated with poppers use.
- Risks associated with poppers misuse can be addressed through better labelling and packaging, together with appropriate harm reduction education. Appropriate labelling and messaging are discouraged in the current regulatory context, in which poppers are illegal to distribute.
- In some cases, more dangerous drugs (including other inhalants) are substituted for poppers when access to safe poppers is restricted<sup>7</sup>.
- Ample evidence indicates that prohibitions on controlled substances do not advance health, but instead undermine health by forcing consumers to obtain products from illegal, unregulated, untrusted and unsafe sources, contributing to the risks of harm<sup>8</sup>.

## **It's time for a sensible policy on poppers:**

1. To properly respond to the health needs of poppers users, a review of Health Canada's position on poppers should be conducted, including an assessment of existing scientific evidence on these benefits and harms, and meaningful consultation with members of this community.
2. Public health efforts need to improve messaging about poppers to people who use them, and this messaging needs to touch on both the potential benefits of these drugs, as well as how to reduce or prevent the potential health concerns associated with them.
3. More research is needed on the health impacts of poppers – both positive and negative – on the people who use them.
4. It's time to reverse Health Canada's ban on the sale of poppers to ensure Canadians have a safe-supply.

<sup>6</sup> Sex Now data & Momentum data.

<sup>7</sup> Hall, T. M., Shoptaw, S., & Reback, C. J. (2014). Sometimes Poppers Are Not Poppers: Huffing as an Emergent Health Concern among MSM Substance Users. *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Mental Health*, 19(1), o. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19359705.2014.973180>

<sup>8</sup> Carter, C. I., & Macpherson, D. (2013). *Getting to Tomorrow: A Report on Canadian Drug Policy*. Canadian Drug Policy Coalition.

## The poppers ban continues a history of Canadian health policy that stigmatizes substance users and sexual minority groups.



- Health Canada's current crackdown on poppers risks worsening health inequities among poppers users in Canada by restricting access to products with potential health benefits.
- Among poppers users there is general uncertainty and concern over the regulatory framework surrounding poppers, as well as about the actual health risks and effects of poppers use. This prevents poppers users from safely and legally procuring poppers.
- People belonging to sexual minority groups experience disproportionately high rates of substance use and substance use-related harms<sup>9</sup>. However, the needs of 2SLGBTQ+ people are frequently unaddressed by harm reduction and substance use policies and programs, which undermines their access to — as well as the effectiveness of — such services.
- Stigma and discrimination are also encountered by 2SLGBTQ+ people in health care and other services, further compromising the reach and benefits of substance use-related services where they do exist.

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## Poppers bans have been reversed in other countries.



- The effects of poppers have recently undergone scrutiny in France (2013), Australia (2019), the United Kingdom (2020), and New Zealand (2020). In all four jurisdictions they were ultimately not banned, making Canada's policy regarding poppers the most restrictive out of this group of countries.
- In August 2020, UK Home Secretary Rt. Hon. Priti Patel expressed motivation to explicitly exempt poppers from the Psychoactive Substances Act of 2016, effectively decriminalizing their supply<sup>10</sup>.
- In both Australia and New Zealand poppers have been authorized for purchase with a prescription, however no poppers manufacturers in either country have completed the regulatory process to be sold. In both countries it is possible to import a 90-day supply of prescription drugs (including poppers) for personal use from overseas pharmacies with a valid prescription. In both jurisdictions, community health advocates are pushing back on this as being too restrictive and calling for a transition plan that would allow stores and venues to continue selling poppers until the market catches up to regulatory requirements<sup>11</sup>.
- Health Canada prohibits the importation of prescription drugs by Canadian residents for personal use, so even if poppers were classified as a prescription drug, access to a safe, regulated, supply of poppers would remain effectively non-existent<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>9</sup> Rainbow Health Ontario. (2014). LGBTQ people, drug use & harm reduction. Retrieved from [https://www.rainbowhealthontario.ca/wp-content/uploads/woocommerce\\_uploads/2015/06/RHO\\_FactSheet\\_LGBTDRUGUSEHARMREDUCTION\\_E.pdf](https://www.rainbowhealthontario.ca/wp-content/uploads/woocommerce_uploads/2015/06/RHO_FactSheet_LGBTDRUGUSEHARMREDUCTION_E.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> See: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/acmd-work-programme-2020-to-2022-commissioning-letter/home-secretarys-commissioning-letter-to-the-chair-of-the-acmd-accessible-version>;

<sup>11</sup> See: <https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/health/122513141/health-officials-to-consult-on-draconian-poppers-ban> and <https://newsroom.unsw.edu.au/news/health/poppers-can-now-be-sold-pharmacies-getting-them-might-not-be-so-easy>

<sup>12</sup> See: <https://cbsa-asfc.gc.ca/publications/dm-md/d19/d19-9-1-eng.html>