

# Hand sanitizer abused: police Fight against H1N1 creates new problem

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TREVOR HAGAN / WINNIPEG FREE PRESS Brian Bechtel of the Main Street Project shows off new alcohol-free hand sanitizer being used there.

It's an unintended consequence of the fight against germs.

Police and social advocates say addicts are abusing hand sanitizer in the wake of the H1N1 virus, when the product flooded store shelves and into public buildings last year.

Sgt. Darrall Randy Kotchon of the Winnipeg Police Service's Division 11 community support unit said his officers have found littered sanitizer debris and received reports indicating the abuse.

Experts say people are adding salt to the hand 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 when officers encountered the issue on patrol and from resident reports. Business owners need to be particularly vigilant, he said.

"With the H1N1, it's something that more people are buying, more people are using, you're seeing them more in most every store (and) bank," said Kotchon. "What unfortunately has happened is people are realizing this is something they can use to get drunk and intoxicated on."

Brian Bechtel, Main Street Project's executive director, said shelter staff confiscated four jugs of sanitizer this week alone. Some clients steal sanitizer from public places, he said, though Main Street Project staff is 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.

Since H1N1's emergence last April, many public facilities are using sanitizer to combat the spread of germs.

Potential misuse of the product gained prominence last June. That's when a Senate committee heard federal health officials discuss 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 pressed against shop owners yet for selling hand sanitizers.

Under the province's Liquor Control Act, an individual found guilty of selling a non-potable intoxicating substance as a beverage can receive a fine of \$2,000 to \$20,000.

They also face up to six months in jail.

Kotchon urged vigilance by business owners, though, who are selling or using hand sanitizer.

"If you have it out, accessible to the public, you have that danger they're going to be stealing this product from you," he said. People also have misused products such as Chinese cooking wine, he said, which has a high amount of salt and poses health risks.

"When you buy something that is designed to be an alcoholic beverage, it has a lot of controls in it. It has a specific alcohol content," he said. "What we find is if people are abusing the mouth-wash and the hairspray and the hand sanitizer, is that the persons become a lot more aggressive, a lot more intoxicated because of it, because we don't know what that alcohol content is."

Heidi Graham, Winnipeg Regional Health Authority spokeswoman, said hand-sanitizer dispensers are locked to stop people from stealing liquid. She said several WRHA facilities have grappled with sanitizer theft.

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

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Law targets intoxicants

What is a non-potable intoxicating substance?

It contains more than one per cent alcohol by volume

It can cause people to become 'intoxicated'

Like hairspray and mouthwash, it's not designed to be consumed as a beverage