

Body Packers and Body Stuffers

Body packing is the practice of concealing illicit substances for the purpose of smuggling, generally by swallowing drug packets that are often designed for gastrointestinal transport. Body stuffers, by contrast, are individuals who swallow large amounts of drug, usually in poorly constructed packages, in order to quickly conceal it from law enforcement officials. The drugs most commonly "packed" are heroin and cocaine, but amphetamines, MDMA, marijuana, and hashish have also been documented. The first recorded body packing occurred in 1973 when a patient suffering a bowel obstruction was shown to have swallowed a condom filled with hashish. Today body packing has been reported in every major city in the United States and around the world. Body packers often swallow about 1 kg of substance, divided into as many as 50-100 packets of 8-10 g each. Body packers usually seek medical care because of intestinal obstruction, airway obstruction, or drug overdose due to packet rupture or leakage. They may also be referred to medical facilities by law enforcement officials.

Severe drug toxicity can develop suddenly in body packers. All body packers should be admitted for observation until the packets have been evacuated or removed. Some packages may be visualized on abdominal radiographs and CT scans. Activated charcoal (1 g/kg) may reduce the absorption of the drugs. If no obstruction exists, whole bowel irrigation with a polyethylene glycol solution administered orally at 2 L/hour may be used to evacuate the gastrointestinal tract. Surgical removal should be considered in patients with bowel obstruction. Endoscopic removal may result in packet rupture and therefore is not recommended.

Symptoms of heroin overdose include central nervous system and respiratory depression, pinpoint pupils, hypoxia, and gastric hypomotility. Heroin overdoses are treated with 0.4-2.0 mg of naloxone, but larger doses may be needed because of the massive amount of drug released upon packet rupture. Symptoms of cocaine overdose include initial CNS excitation, seizures and tachycardia, followed by coma, hypotension, and respiratory depression. Because no specific antidote exists for cocaine overdoses, body packers who present with symptoms of cocaine toxicity should be given supportive care until the packets are eliminated.

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DID YOU KNOW THAT... camphor balls and blocks are being sold in the U. S.?



It was recently discovered that camphor-containing mothballs and blocks are being sold over the internet. Some are brightly colored, look like candy, and may be in packages attractive to children. The potential for serious poisonings exists if children have access to them. See the July/Aug 2006 ToxTidbits at

www.mdpoison.com/publications/toxtidbit_pdf/2006/July-August%202006%20Toxtidbits.pdf for more information on the toxicity of camphor.



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