

13. Alkyl Nitrites

(2021 version)

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Introduction

Alkyl nitrites are clear, yellow and volatile liquids with a sweet, fragrant odour. There are a number of compounds within the alkyl nitrite family, such as amyl nitrite and isobutyl nitrite. At the beginning of the 20th century alkyl nitrites were used to help people suffering from chest pains (angina), and have gone on to be used in industry for various purposes ranging from preserving food to the production of perfume. Alkyl Nitrites are not the same as a commonly used angina treatment, glyceryl trinitrate.

How They Are Taken

These drugs first appeared on the market in ampoules that had to be broken, making the popping sound that led to their street name 'Poppers'. Now they are sold in small bottles with plug or screw tops, labelled with one of their many street names. The vapour is inhaled through the nose and mouth.

Some of its street names are:

• Bananas	• Locker Room	• Nitrites
• Poppers	• Rush	• Isobutyl Nitrite



• Liquid Gold	• TNT	• Kix
• Ram	• Thrust	• Stud

Health

Poppers are stimulants which are inhaled through the nose and absorbed in the lungs, and the effects are evident within 10 seconds. They cause the walls of blood vessels to relax and this is most apparent in the head and neck. Within 30 seconds the face flushes, the neck perspires and the heart rate increases.

The positive effects from use are that it may cause a brief 'high' which produces perceptual disorders. It is alleged to intensify sexual experiences, both homosexual and heterosexual and the drug is relatively popular within the gay scene.

Short-term negative effects are felt within 30 seconds and last for no more than 2 or 3 minutes. They are:

- light-headedness
- weakness
- headaches (short and long-term)

Someone using alkyl nitrites may behave light-headed, they may be unsteady on their feet and could appear to be confused.

The drug's ability to relax smooth muscles and dilate blood vessels, thereby causing a rapid drop in blood pressure may cause the user to pass out, possibly

causing damage to the brain and other organs. The user may also experience nausea, dizziness, and delirium. Long-term use and high doses are more likely to cause these effects.

The drug should never be used if the user has also taken blood pressure medication or Viagra, as the more serious side effects are much more likely to occur.

A few cases have been known where people have accidentally swallowed poppers, mistaking them for caffeine shots. Poppers should NOT be taken orally. Oral consumption of alkyl nitrites can lead to methaemoglobinemia, a condition which affects the red blood cells, reducing the amount of oxygen available to the body. The greater the proportion of methemoglobin in the bloodstream, the greater become the effects on the body. Effects of methaemoglobinemia include Cyanosis (grey/blue skin), Headache, Breathlessness, Light-headedness and collapse, Weakness, Confusion, Palpitations, Chest Pain, Abnormal cardiac rhythms, Drowsiness and confusion, Seizures, Coma and Death.

Dependence

There is a risk of psychological dependence but not physical dependence.

Tolerance

Within 2-3 weeks of regular use tolerance can also develop. This tolerance can be reversed if the drug is avoided for a few days, but if it is used again it can produce bad headaches not experienced with previous use.

The Law

Alkyl nitrites are not controlled by the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, so they are legal to buy and sell.

Alkyl Nitrites Statistics

Last updated December 2020

Use of Alkyl Nitrites

The Crime Survey for England and Wales hasn't asked about the use of this drug since the 2016/17 survey.

However, in the 2016/17 survey, 0.5% of adults aged 16-59 reported using alkyl nitrites in the last year, while 2.0% of young adults aged 16-24 said they had used alkyl nitrites in the last year.

In 2010/11, 0.9% of adults aged 16-59 said they had used the drug in the last year and 2.4% of young adults aged 16-24 said they had used the drug in the last year.

(British Crime Survey, 2010/11; Crime Survey for England and Wales, 2016/17)