



Physicians for Human Rights

Preparing for, Protecting Against, and Treating Tear Gas and Other Chemical Irritant Exposure: A Protestor's Guide

As people around the world take to the streets to protest against police brutality, they are often being met with violent crackdowns by law enforcement officers firing tear gas and other crowd-control weapons. Deceptively known as “less-lethal,” these weapons can in fact cause severe injuries and even death when used with excessive force. Physicians for Human Rights has worked extensively on the **health impacts** of these weapons and has issued the following guidance to help people seeking to exercise their right to protest prepare for, protect against, and treat tear gas and other chemical irritant (e.g., pepper spray) exposure.

What to wear to protect yourself against tear gas and other chemical agents when protesting



Facemask

Scarves or bandanas large enough to cover your face from nose to chin can serve as substitutes.



Shatter-resistant eye protection

(e.g. shatter-resistant sunglasses, swim goggles, or a gas mask).



Clothing

Covering all your skin as much as possible.



Shoes

Comfortable, closed, protective shoes that you can run in.



Avoid wearing contact lenses

Which can trap irritating chemicals, such as tear gas powder, underneath. If you do wear contacts lenses, keep a full facial gas mask or goggles on at all times.



Avoid wearing makeup

Such as eyeliner, for the same reason.

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What to bring to a protest



Water

In your own plastic bottle with a squirt top (to drink and to wash off your skin or eyes).



Backpack or drawstring bag

Rather than an over-the-shoulder or a cross-body bag – in case you need to run.



Identification

And/or emergency contact information (consider writing this on your skin).



Cash

For food and transportation or cash bail, in case you are arrested. Check how much bail is in your location.



Inhaler

Epipen, and several days of prescription medication, in case you are arrested.



Medical alert bracelet

Or information about any chronic medical conditions or allergies.



Change of clothes

In case you are exposed to chemical irritants.

How to protect yourself against the coronavirus when protesting

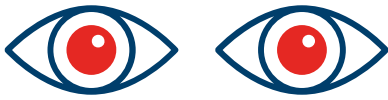
- Recognize that attending a crowded protest puts you at risk for exposure to the coronavirus.
- Wear a facemask covering your mouth and nose during the protest.
- Try to practice social distancing as much as possible (maintain a distance of six feet from other people).
- Bring hand sanitizer with you if you can and use regularly throughout the protest, especially after touching others or high-touch surfaces. After the protest, wash your hands with soap and water.
- Make your voice heard through placards, signs, and/or noisemakers, and minimize the type of chanting and yelling that can propel potentially infected droplets into the air.
- If you're sick, stay home.
- If you have underlying conditions or other vulnerabilities to the coronavirus, weigh your risks carefully as you decide if, when, and where to protest. There may be other ways you can assist besides attending demonstrations.
- Due to the high risk for exposure when coming in contact with large crowds, consider self- quarantining for two weeks, as recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, as well as getting tested four to five days after the protest. Many localities now offer free/ available testing for demonstrators.
- If you live with anyone whose health or age makes them vulnerable to a serious coronavirus infection, consider your obligation to protect them and find other means of contributing to the cause.

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How to protect yourself against tear gas and other chemical irritants

Agent CS, the most commonly used form of tear gas, is a crystalline powder that is converted into a fine spray and propelled from a grenade or canister by a small pyrotechnic explosion. Agent OC, commonly known as pepper spray, is essentially a highly concentrated form of hot pepper. Though tear gas was classified as a chemical weapon in 1993 and banned from use in international warfare, law enforcement officers are still allowed to use it on civilians in the United States. Some localities are starting to ban use of these chemicals for crowd control by police in the wake of Black Lives Matter protests and their violent disruptions.

When a tear gas canister explodes, CS powder sprays into the air and adheres to any moisture it can find, including the tears in your eyes, the sweat on your skin, the grease in your hair, and the saliva and mucus that cover your mouth and airways. Symptoms of tear gas exposure can include the following, according to the CDC:



Eyes

Excessive tearing, redness, burning, blurred vision



Skin

Burns and rash



Mouth

Burning, irritation, drooling, trouble swallowing



Nose

Running, burning, and swelling



Lungs

Chest tightness, shortness of breath, wheezing, coughing, choking sensation



Stomach

Nausea and vomiting

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What to do if you're exposed to tear gas or other chemical irritants

What to do immediately

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- If you live with anyone whose health or age makes them vulnerable to a serious coronavirus infection, consider your obligation to protect them and find other means of contributing to the cause.

How to further get rid of the chemical irritant

- Change your clothes as soon as possible. Rinse your body as soon as you get to a location with a shower. Take off your shoes outside your home to keep them from bringing any powder indoors.
- Shed all the clothes you were wearing and hang them in an open, ventilated area for at least 48 hours before washing them. If you are not able to keep them in an open place, store them in a sealed bag until they are ready to be washed. Do not mix them with uncontaminated garments, as CS powder can be active for as long as five days after being released.
- Take a cold shower for at least 20 minutes to prevent the chemicals from irritating your skin any further. Do your best not to breathe in more tear gas during the shower, and keep your eyes closed. Wash your hair especially well.
- If you're still having symptoms 30 minutes or so after getting all the agents off, are having eye or lung issues, or are at all concerned about your exposure, seek medical care.

What to do if your rights have been violated

- Review "Know Your Rights" documents before heading out to a protest, such as this [ACLU guide](#).
- If your rights are violated by law enforcement officers, when you can, write down everything you remember from the scene, including the officers' badge and patrol car numbers.
- Get contact information for witnesses.
- Take photographs of any injuries. Get medical treatment right away if you need it and ask for a copy of any medical records.

Resources

1. Physicians for Human Rights: "[Lethal in Disguise: The Health Consequences of Crowd-Control Weapons](#)"
2. Physicians for Human Rights: [Crowd-control Weapons Fact Sheets](#)



Physicians for
Human Rights

For more than 30 years, Physicians for Human Rights (PHR) has used science and the uniquely credible voices of medical professionals to document and call attention to severe human rights violations around the world. PHR, which shared in the Nobel Peace Prize for its work to end the scourge of land mines, uses its investigations and expertise to advocate for persecuted health workers and facilities under attack, prevent torture, document mass atrocities, and hold those who violate human rights accountable.



Shared in the 1997
Nobel Peace Prize