

The use of OC, chemical agents during the COVID-19 pandemic

LE should consider de-prioritizing the use of chemical agents if the benefit of using these tools is outweighed by the risk of spreading COVID-19



By Diane Loos

One of the most common methods in law enforcement for gaining control of a resistive subject is the [use of chemical agents, particularly OC spray](#).

Although OC and chemical agents can be very effective in suspect or [riot control situations](#), the use of such tools results in coughing and sneezing by those exposed – often including other law enforcement personnel or even bystanders.

With the risk of COVID-19 contagion, what does this mean for the use of OC and other chemical agents right now? (Photo/PoliceOne)

With the risk of [COVID-19 contagion](#), what does this mean for the use of OC and other chemical agents right now?

Dr. Jeffrey Ho, a deputy sheriff and medical director for [Meeker County Sheriff's Office](#) in Minnesota, and chief EMS medical director for Hennepin Healthcare System's Departments of Emergency Medicine and EMS says in his opinion it is a "bad idea."

"The biggest reason deploying chemical agents is a bad idea is that these agents are respiratory irritants and cause the production of a lot of secretions, which results in coughing," said Dr. Ho. "We know that coughing is one of the best ways to aerosolize germs into microparticles that become airborne and could then infect others. These microparticles also land on surfaces and data suggests could live for several days. If those surfaces are touched later on by someone, you now have the perfect chance for spreading those particles elsewhere and infecting others."

The risks from airborne particles in this situation are numerous. If OC or other chemical agents are used, the assessment of potential contamination should not only include persons, but the physical environment where any microparticles could land. Without proper and thorough decontamination procedures, there may be a higher risk for exposure to the coronavirus.

AVOID GOING HANDS-ON

Dr. Ho adds another consideration is what usually happens after exposing a suspect to OC spray: "It is my experience as a sworn deputy sheriff that using OC on someone almost always results in me having to go hands-on with them in some fashion, even if it is just to guide them to where they need to go or to what they need to do because they can't see well and are anxious enough that it is difficult for them to calm down and comply with what I am telling them to do."

Going hands-on with a subject can be inevitable in certain law enforcement circumstances. However, the use of OC increases the risk of exposure to infectious particles from the subject's uncontrolled coughing. By going hands-on with a subject after deployment of OC, not only will you be contaminated, but likely your equipment and clothing as well. Without personal or equipment decontamination before leaving the area there will be a high likelihood of carrying particles to both persons and other environments such as your patrol vehicle.

As in any handcuffing situation, restrained suspects coughing or sneezing without any way to cover their face will be spreading microparticles both airborne and onto surfaces, resulting in exposure to anyone close to the suspect or touching any contaminated surface.

POTENTIAL MEDICAL RISKS

What about the risk of exposing someone who is COVID-19 positive to OC spray or chemical agents? Can spraying a subject who is COVID-19 positive with OC potentially aggravate their medical condition?

According to Dr. Ho, "As for whether or not OC directly puts lung tissue that is COVID-19 positive in danger, there is no data to support or refute that because it really has not been studied." Simply put, the answer is we just don't know at this point.

As Dr. Ho notes, the lack of data supporting either conclusion leaves us in uncharted waters. The safer approach could be to look for other options and wait for the research to determine whether a subject's safety is unreasonably compromised by this type of action.

REASSESS RIOT CONTROL TACTICS

Most current riot-control tactics have at their heart a strong reliance on chemical agents to achieve law enforcement goals. In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, these tactics should be reviewed, and alternatives weighed, for resolving the incident without the use of chemical agents.

The proximity of subjects in crowds, combined with the use of agents that will cause coughing and sneezing, will undoubtedly pose a contamination threat for both first responders, as well as members of the public *not* involved in the incident. If chemical agents must be used, ordinary decontamination protocols may be complicated by COVID-19 concerns.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR LE

Since there are still so many unknowns about COVID-19 exposure, law enforcement agencies may want to consider the following:

- Alternative tactics and deployment considerations for individual or crowd control;
- Physical surroundings if deploying OC or chemical agents;
- Ability to monitor subjects (and anyone surrounding who might have been exposed) post-exposure.

The possible presence and spread of COVID-19 are legitimate considerations in the deployment of OC or chemical agents in the field. Law enforcement should consider de-prioritizing the use of OC or other chemical agents if the benefit of using these tools is outweighed by the risk of spreading COVID-19.

About the author

Diane Loos has a BA in Human Services and graduated in 2005 from the FBI National Academy, Session 222. Diane has over 30 years of law enforcement experience in metropolitan Atlanta, Georgia, as a uniform officer, commander of the Special Investigations Unit, and captain over the Training Division/Academy, where she obtained multiple GA POST instructor certifications. She was promoted to deputy chief over the Support Services Division, where she retired after 25 years of service. After her career retirement, Diane began teaching at a local technical college law enforcement academy as the lead instructor and CALEA manager for Training Academy certification. She is currently a content developer for Lexipol, where she has been since April 2017.

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