

# Do we know the effects of tear gas on our health?

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## **Do we know the effects of tear gas on our health?**

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**By Dr Brighton Chireka**

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We are witnessing a population that has had enough of the suffering and is now protesting. Sadly the government of Zimbabwe is as usual deploying the riot police fully equipped with tear gas . The main aim is to disperse and frighten the citizens but no attention has been or is being given to the health effects of that tear gas. I have tried to ask some of the riot police if they knew the effects of the gas on themselves and those people they are trying to chase away. The honest answer I got was, "we do not know and we do not care all we want is for you to stop demonstrating "

### **Immediate effects of tear gas**

I have been involved in demonstrations during my days as a student at University of Zimbabwe and have experience this awful tear gas . When this gas gets to your eyes it causes intense pain and secretion of tears and also mucous ( madzihwa) in the airways. Sometimes you feel as if you are suffocating or drowning and you try to gasp for air . The experience can be shocking as you feel as if you are about to die.

If you are a healthy and fit person the effects can last a few minutes to a couple of hours but it can last longer in those that have breathing problems such as asthma, or tuberculosis.

The challenge now is do we know what happens to victims of tear gas in the following weeks , months , or even years? I got the answer from one of the police officer that they do not care but myself I do care and I am worried . This is an area that has not been addressed and people continue to be tear gassed unabatedly .

### **CS gas**

Tear gas is commonly known as CS gas a name derived from the first letters of the surnames of the scientist that discovered it . ( Ben Corson and Roger Stoughton) .

Sometimes methylene chloride is used as a solvent for the tear gas and it is known to cause cancer. The other solvent in which CS is dissolved is Methyl Isobutyl Ketone (MIBK) which is also classified as harmful.

### **Studies on tear gas**

I have looked at research that has been done to look into this area and found that in Turkey studies have been done and the results are worrying. Victims of tear gas have been followed up by Turkey doctors and the results are showing that there is lung damage that occurs after exposure to the gas. Victims were found to have symptoms similar to asthma and also reduced capacity for their lungs to breathe properly. This is worse in those that already have underlying breathing problems. In 2011 Chile temporarily suspended the use of tear gas after a university of Chile study linked it to miscarriage and foetal harm. Physicians for human rights in 2012 found that local doctors in Bahrain were reporting increased numbers of miscarriages in exposed areas. UN officials have also connected tear gas to miscarriage in the Palestinian Territories . CS gas is also known to

damage the heart and liver as well

In Egypt , CS gas was reported to be the cause of death of several protestors in Mohamed Mahmoud street near Tahrir during the November 2011 protests.

These effects of the tear gas are not only seen in people involved in demonstrations. The CS gas does spread and cover a large area thereby affecting people who may be away from the scene of demonstrations.

## **What can you do to stop the effects of CS gas**

Some News reporters are able to cover the riots regardless of tear gas because they wear gas masks, mask and googles. These work well but not everyone can afford them. If you have no protection then it is advisable to cover your mouth and nose with a handkerchief. Avoid being in a confined space, try to stand in fresh air. Remember that you will need to wash yourself and all clothes as the gas will remain on you and your clothes.

Any exposed skin should be washed with soap and water. Use shower to clean yourself and do not bathe. Don't rub your eyes or face as this will make it worse.

## **Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC)**

Use of CS in warfare is prohibited under the terms of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) but domestic use is allowed. The reason is that if allowed for military use then other forces will end up using chemical weapons such as nerve agents. This does not make sense to me because we know that desperate governments do not follow the manufacturer's guidelines on how to use tear gas. Research as stated above shows that it is not safe to use CS gas even in domestic cases.

In Zimbabwe we have witnessed tear gas canisters being thrown into confined places such as vehicles (Kombi). This is not only cruel but it is illegal . There are instructions on how to use and not to use the tear gas and I doubt if our police are fully trained. If this abuse of tear gas continues then a call for an export ban of the tear gas is justified. I have personally witnessed these riot police throwing tear gas canisters into halls of residence at the University of Zimbabwe.

## **Conclusion**

A responsible government does not use dangerous chemicals on its own people regardless of disagreements . My question is why then do we allow tear gas to be used for crowd control agent when studies are showing that it is not safe. Some governments use statement by the manufacturers that it is safe when independent research is showing otherwise. In view of the current research I call for the stoppage of the use of tear gas until the Zimbabwean government

can show us the independent evidence that it is safe to use and that our police is trained on how to properly use it. We also need more research on the effects of tear gas on Zimbabweans who live within and near harare city centre. The health of a nation must not continue to be jeopardised in the quest to retain political power.

## Reference

1- [WIKIPEDIA ON CS GAS](#)

2- [STUDY IN TURKEY](#)

This article was compiled by **Dr Brighton Chireka** , who is a GP and a blogger based in Kent in the United Kingdom. Feel free to contact him at [info@docbeecee.co.uk](mailto:info@docbeecee.co.uk) and you can read more of his work on his blog at [DR CHIREKA'S BLOG](#)

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