

Butane hash oil: A single spark can lead to an explosion during production

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Hash is as old as marijuana cultivation itself and butane hash oil, too, has been around for a few years. But newer production methods that do a better job of stripping hash oil of residual solvent have made the product more popular, say BHO consumers.

The process for making BHO involves packing marijuana leaves and flowers into a tube, like a PVC pipe. Butane is then forced into the tube, which is outfitted with a filter on the bottom.

The liquid is captured in a container and exposed to heat, which helps burn off the butane. Some producers use a griddle or a double boiler. Some, particularly commercial producers of BHO, rely on a vacuum oven to rid the hash oil of solvent.

If the process takes place in an enclosed space, such as a garage, bathroom or kitchen, the butane can fill the room as it evaporates.

“If that were to, say, happen in a kitchen where there is a freezer or a stove with a pilot light, or a freezer when the compressor kicks on and it puts out a tiny spark, if your concentration of gas is high enough in the room – boom!” said Jess Ordower, 37, an owner of Udoxi Scientific, one of a handful of commercial BHO producers in the state.

“It blows the windows out,” he said. “It blows the doors out. You are going to end up hairless.”

The injuries from BHO-related explosions can be disfiguring. Recovery is grueling and typically takes weeks or months, said Dr. Nick Eshraghi, a surgeon and associate director of Legacy Emanuel Medical Center’s burn unit.

“All have caused major injuries,” he said of the BHO-fueled explosions. “You are talking about an entire room being engulfed in flames and one’s clothing catching on fire.”

Eshraghi and his colleagues noticed a trend in Oregon about a year ago, when young men, mostly in their 20s and 30s, started showing up at the hospital with severe burns to their upper bodies and hands.

BHO-related explosions aren’t tracked by state or local agencies in Oregon. At The Oregonian’s request, Legacy Emanuel Medical Center, home to the state’s only burn unit, combed through 16 months of patient records to determine how many people were treated for BHO-related burns. Of the 17 people burned in butane explosions, one or two involved southwest Washington residents. Some were injured in the same explosions. Others quietly sought treatment after getting burned while handling butane.

However in Colorado, where recreational use of marijuana became legal this year, a federally funded regional drug enforcement agency has started tracking the explosions. The Rocky Mountain High Intensity Trafficking Area identified 31 of them since January. That's up from 11 in all of 2013. And so far this year, 21 people have been injured, according to Kevin Wong, an agency analyst.

University of Colorado Hospital's burn unit, which treats the most gravely injured BHO victims in the state, started tracking BHO-related injuries after seeing an uptick in blast patients last year, said Camy Boyle, an associate nurse manager at the facility. (Statistics on BHO blast victims treated by UW Medicine Regional Burn Center at Harborview in Seattle were not available.)

Boyle, who said the burn unit has treated 10 BHO blast victims so far this year, reported on the trend at the March meeting of the American Burn Association, the group representing medical providers who care for burn patients.

Doctors and nurses who treat BHO burn victims aren't trying to make a political statement about marijuana or hash oil, she said.

"We just want it to be done safely," Boyle said. "If you can go to a dispensary and buy hash oil, go to the dispensary and buy hash oil. You don't need to go on YouTube and watch how it's made and blow your house up."