

That Burning Sensation (Outdoor Canada March 2001)

Pepper spray can be hazardous to your health – and dignity – as a hapless angler recently discovered.

While fishing for salmon in a remote part of Alaska thick with black bears, the Alberta man and his two companions each packed a can of bear spray. An effective last-resort deterrent against aggressive bears, the spray's main ingredient, capsaicin, can cause severe burning in the eyes and nose – and on certain parts of the body.

One morning, the anglers decided to test their cans to ensure they worked properly. Two discharged powerful bursts, but the third sent a weak trickle dribbling out the nozzle and onto the Albertan's right hand. Thinking nothing of it, he rinsed his hand and resumed fishing. Then, in the midst of a hot salmon run, nature called.

Rushing ashore, he dropped his waders and when he grabbed his, er, equipment, an intense burning sensation engulfed his nether region. Screaming in pain, he tore off his clothes and jumped into the cold, waist-deep river. Several minutes later, he emerged red-faced and, most likely, quite red a little lower.

For those who happen to get pepper spray on their skin, experts say you should first submerge the exposed parts in water for up to 15 minutes. Then rub the area with vegetable oil before washing it thoroughly with soap and water. If the pepper spray gets in your eyes, flush it out with water; if you wear contact lenses, remove them immediately. Don't apply lotion or cream, as it could intensify the burning sensation.

And if you accidentally get the spray on your hands, avoid touching sensitive areas such as your eyes, nose and, well, you know.

Remember, it's called bear – not bare – spray.