

## **Handle with care: A safety guide to smelling salts**

OSF HealthCare Newsroom

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### **PRINT SCRIPT**

Winning a sporting event can come down to the last second or even just a couple of inches. And athletes look for whatever might give them the edge against their opponents.

One example: smelling salts, a trend that is making the rounds on social media.

## **What are smelling salts?**

Ammonia inhalants, commonly known as smelling salts, are bottled powders or packets used to arouse consciousness. [The British Journal of Sports Medicine reports](#) the release of ammonia gas irritates the membranes of the nose and lungs, which triggers an inhalation reflex. Athletes use this as an added burst of energy before hitting the field, and body builders may use this before a max-weight lift in the gym.

Karan Rai, MD, is a sports medicine physician with OSF HealthCare. He says the smelling salts can also increase your heart rate and give a sense of having more energy.

“Typically, though, that’s more of a placebo effect,” Dr. Rai says.

## **Are there dangers to smelling salts?**

For the most part, there are no significant health risks to athletes using smelling salts. Dr. Rai says his directions are more focused on the proper way to use them.

“The most detrimental part of a smelling salt is if you are holding it too close to your nose or using it too often,” Dr. Rai says. “It can cause some injury if used too frequently. I definitely would not recommend inserting them into your nostrils.”

## **How do smelling salts impact those with heart conditions?**

As Dr. Rai mentioned, smelling salts can increase your heart rate. So, what impact does this have on someone with a heart condition?

“The time that the body is having that increased heart rate shouldn’t be enough to exacerbate anyone’s cardiac status if they do have an underlying atrial fibrillation or arrhythmia,” Dr. Rai says.

## **How can smelling salts affect someone’s routine?**

[Research shows](#) having a routine before and/or during a sporting event, as well as an athlete's superstition, can help boost their performance.

"Smelling salts can be part of someone's routine or superstition, prior to performing a maximal lift in the weight room or before participating in an athletic competition. That has shown routines and superstitions help you get more prepared and more focused," Dr. Rai adds.

## **Should smelling salts be used after a head injury?**

Dr. Rai says smelling salts, or a form of them, have been used since the Victorian ages. [The British Journal of Sports Medicine concludes](#) that smelling salts were used to help women who had fainting spells. But the Journal cites a lack of evidence showing any benefit to using smelling salts after a sport-related head injury. Dr. Rai agrees.

"This was thought to help revive an athlete. Nowadays that is contraindicated. One reason is when someone is being assessed for a head injury, another concerning area is if they've had a spinal injury," Dr. Rai says. "Typically, if you're inhaling that salt, it can cause a whiplash effect on your cervical spine, which can exacerbate an underlying injury."

Dr. Rai says if you're considering trying out smelling salts, speak with your health care provider first.