



Hooch Tragedies in India

For Prelims: [Methanol](#), [Athanol](#), [Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita](#), [Geographic Information System](#), [National Health Mission](#)

For Mains: Effect of Spurious Liquor on the Human Body, Pros and Cons of Liquor Ban, Government Policies & Interventions.

[Source:IE](#)

Why in News?

A major [hooch tragedy](#) in Punjab's Amritsar district has claimed 21 lives and left several hospitalised after the consumption of spurious liquor suspected to **contain [methanol](#), a highly toxic chemical.**

Note: Hooch refers to poor-quality, often **illicitly produced alcohol**, a term derived from the **Hoochinoo tribe of Alaska** known for brewing strong liquor.

- It is typically made in **unregulated and unhygienic conditions**. Sometimes, hooch contains a high quantity of **methanol** (an industrial alcohol along with [ethanol](#)), which is **highly toxic and can be fatal** when consumed.

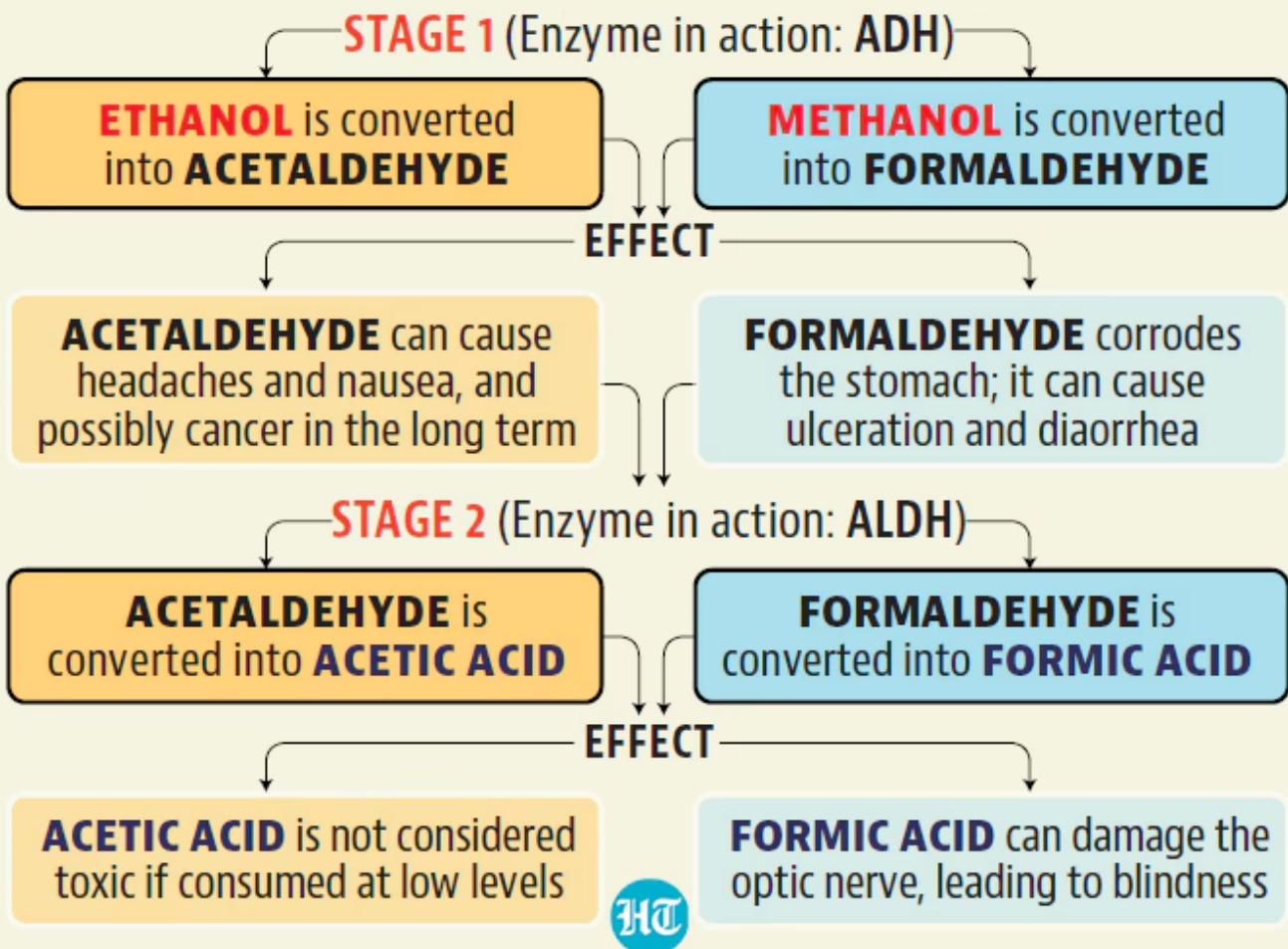
What is Methanol?

- **About:** Methanol, also known as **methyl alcohol, wood alcohol, or wood spirit**, is the simplest alcohol, with the **chemical formula CH_3OH** .
 - Methanol is a **colorless, volatile liquid with a faintly sweet** pungent odor and is completely miscible with water.
- **Applications:** It serves as a solvent in paints, varnishes, and plastics. It is a key raw material in the production of **formaldehyde, acetic acid, and various aromatic [hydrocarbons](#)**.
 - Methanol also functions as an **antifreeze agent and fuel additive**, helping **remove water from automotive and aviation fuels**.
 - Additionally, it is gaining prominence as a **biodegradable energy resource** in sustainable energy applications.
- **Impact on Human Body:** Methanol is highly toxic to humans, especially if ingested. It breaks down into formic acid in the liver, causing **metabolic acidosis and lowering blood pH**.
 - This disrupts oxygen use in cells, leading to **organ damage**. Methanol can also harm the **optic nerve, causing blindness**, and may result in brain swelling or bleeding, which can lead to coma or death.
- **Regulatory Framework:** The **Food Safety and Standards (Alcoholic Beverages) Regulations 2018** set maximum methanol limits in liquors to ensure safety and quality.
 - Methanol is listed under **Schedule I of the Manufacture, Storage and Import of**

- The **Indian Standard IS 517** provides specifications for determining methanol quality.

How a body responds to alcohol

The body metabolises alcohol in a two-step process. For ethanol, a harmful product at step 1 is removed in step 2; for methanol, products at both stages are highly toxic.



What are the Causes of Hooch Tragedies in India?

- **Economic Vulnerability and Poverty:** People from economically weaker sections often **resort to cheap, locally brewed alcohol (hooch)** as they cannot afford licensed, quality liquor.
 - The cost of hooch is significantly lower than legal alcohol due to evasion of excise duty and taxes.
- **Widespread Misuse of Methanol:** Methanol, an inexpensive industrial chemical, is often stolen and **illegally added to illicit liquor to increase potency**, despite its extreme toxicity. Bootleggers frequently use methanol to produce deadly hooch, as seen in several mass poisoning cases.
- **Lack of Regulation and Enforcement:** Despite the [Excise Act, 1944](#) and local regulations, enforcement is often weak, allowing illegal brewing and distribution to flourish.

- In states with alcohol prohibition (e.g., Bihar, Gujarat), hooch networks expand underground, exploiting weak enforcement.
- Methyl alcohol is not categorised as a "**poison**" under the definition provided in the [Poison Act, 1919](#), thereby limiting the scope of legal culpability.
 - This legal gap complicates the prosecution of such cases and highlights the need for legislative reform.
- **Political and Bureaucratic Nexus:** There are frequent allegations of political protection and bureaucratic involvement in illegal liquor trade.
 - Political connections sometimes provide **immunity to hooch manufacturers**, preventing law enforcement action. **Bribery and corruption** further allow bootleggers to operate without fear of police intervention.
- **Lack of Awareness and Social Stigma:** In rural and semi-urban areas, there is a lack of awareness about the dangers of consuming unregulated alcohol.
 - **Social stigma** around alcoholism also prevents people from seeking medical help when symptoms of poisoning appear.
- **Absence of Community Reporting Mechanisms:** Fear of local liquor mafias prevents communities from reporting illegal hooch production.
 - There is often no structured system to anonymously report bootlegging activities to authorities.
- **Flaws in Supply Chain Monitoring:** Lack of digital tracking and surveillance of raw materials like methanol allows for unchecked distribution.
 - Absence of real-time tracking mechanisms makes it difficult to identify illegal distilleries.
- **Case Studies of Major Hooch Tragedies in India:**
 - **Mumbai (2015):** A hooch tragedy killed around 100 people in Malwani due to methanol poisoning.
 - **Punjab (2020):** More than 100 people died after consuming adulterated liquor in multiple districts.
 - **Bihar (2022):** Despite prohibition, 40 people lost their lives in Saran due to spurious liquor consumption.
 - **Tamil Nadu (2024):** A severe illicit liquor tragedy in Kallakurichi, Tamil Nadu, caused over 50 deaths.

Legal Measures to Prevent Hooch

- **Excise Act, 1944** regulates the production and distribution of alcohol, including penalties for illegal manufacturing.
- States like **Bihar, and Gujarat** have complete prohibition, yet hooch incidents still occur.
- [Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita \(BNS\), 2023](#) includes specific sections like 103 (murder) and 105 (culpable homicide not amounting to murder) for hooch-related deaths.
- **Alcohol regulation** is under the **Seventh Schedule of the Constitution of India, specifically the State List**, granting states exclusive power to legislate on its production, sale, and distribution. Therefore, alcohol laws vary across states.

What Measures are Needed to Prevent Hooch Tragedies?

- **Effective Enforcement and Monitoring:** Initiatives like **Operation Moonshine** (conducted in Kochi, Kerala) show the success of coordinated raids and monitoring by excise, police, and forest departments.
 - Launch a **Centralized Methanol Tracking Portal** under the Ministry of Chemicals and Fertilizers to monitor methanol production, sale, and transportation.
 - Use [blockchain technology](#) to create an immutable ledger of methanol supply chains, preventing diversion to illicit alcohol production.
 - Employing digital tools such as [GIS \(Geographic Information System\) mapping](#) for identifying illegal brewing hotspots, and CCTV surveillance can improve enforcement efficacy.

- **Public Awareness Campaigns:** Under the [National Health Mission \(NHM\)](#), launch focused **IEC (Information, Education, and Communication)** campaigns in vulnerable regions educating on dangers of spurious liquor and methanol poisoning.:
 - Panchayats, religious leaders, and **SHGs (Self-Help Groups)** can be mobilized to discourage consumption and report illegal brewing.
- **Access to Affordable, Quality-Controlled Alcohol:** Rationalizing taxation and ensuring availability of safe, regulated alcohol can reduce demand for spurious liquor.
- **Socio-Economic Support and Alternative Livelihoods:** Integrate affected communities into skill development programs under the [Deen Dayal Upadhyaya Grameen Kaushalya Yojana \(DDU-GKY\)](#) to reduce economic dependence on illicit liquor consumption or production.
 - Provide educational scholarships and health insurance to children of hooch victims.
- **Accountability of Police and Excise Officials:** Institutionalize a **Performance Audit system** for police and excise departments with clear benchmarks related to curbing illicit liquor trade.
 - **Enforce strict disciplinary actions**, including suspension and prosecution, for officials found negligent or complicit.
- **International Guidelines and Best Practices:** The **WHO Global Strategy to Reduce the Harmful Use of Alcohol (2010)** advocates for controlling availability, reducing demand through pricing policies, and preventing illicit alcohol production.
 - **Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 3.5** emphasize strengthening prevention and treatment of substance abuse.

Conclusion

Recurring hooch tragedies in India reflect deeper socio-economic and governance failures. The Amritsar incident highlights the **urgent need for a coordinated approach** involving strict regulation, public awareness, enforcement accountability, and community engagement to break the **cycle of poverty, profiteering, and neglect fueling the illicit liquor trade**.

Drishti Mains Question:

Methanol poisoning in hooch tragedies has emerged as a major public health crisis. What preventive mechanisms can be institutionalized to address this?

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Question (PYQ)

Prelims:

Q. Bisphenol A (BPA), a cause of concern, is a structural/key component in the manufacture of which of the following kinds of plastics? (2021)

- (a) Low-density polyethylene
- (b) Polycarbonate
- (c) Polyethylene terephthalate
- (d) Polyvinyl chloride

Answer: (b)

Q. 'Triclosan', considered harmful when exposed to high levels for a long time, is most likely present in which of the following? (2021)

- (a) Food preservatives
- (b) Fruit-ripening substances

(c) Reused plastic containers

(d) Toiletries

Answer: (d)

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