Management of body packers in the emergency department

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Body packing of illicit drugs is one of the means of drug trafficking. Asymptomatic suspects may be brought in by law-enforcement officers for body search of possible drug packing inside the body. Symptomatic body packers may present with gastrointestinal obstruction or toxicity of the leaking drugs inside the packets. Management strategies are largely determined by the modes of presentation. Asymptomatic persons must be persuaded with every effort for consent to the body cavity search as well as treatment for the safe passage of any packed drugs to avoid possible complications and medico-legal sequelae. Abdominal X-rays and computed tomography can be helpful in confirming the presence of drug packets and in identifying possible packet leakage. Gastrointestinal decontamination, whole bowel irrigation, use of specific antidote as well as operative intervention may be indicated. Emergency physicians must be conversant with the medical and legal aspects of the management of these body packers. (Hong Kong j.emerg.med. 2005;12:112-118)

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