

# INHALANTS

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## WHAT ARE INHALANTS?

These are chemicals which evaporate easily and are abused by inhaling—“sniffing,” “bagging,” or “huffing.” They cause a “high” when their vapors are inhaled. Many of these chemicals are found in common household products which are not normally thought of as drugs.

Even if they are inhaled accidentally, these chemicals can cause injury or health damage. But the concentration of vapors is higher, the chemicals are absorbed into the blood more rapidly, and the risks are much greater when they are intentionally inhaled.

## WHICH INHALANTS ARE ABUSED?

Many aerosol sprays are abused, including products such as spray paint, aerosol whipped cream, cooking oil spray, and hair spray. The gas which propels these products is inhaled. “Whippets,” the pressurized canisters that propel whipped cream, are also abused.

Certain solvents and glues are also abused. These include gasoline, transmission fluid, model airplane and other glues, nail polish and nail polish remover, paint thinners, some felt tip markers, and some typing correction fluids.

Medical substances which may be abused by inhaling include the anesthetics nitrous oxide (laughing gas) and halothane.

Butyl nitrite (also called “Rush,” “Jock,” and “Locker Room”) is also abused. It is sometimes sold as a “room odorizer” or “liquid incense.”

## WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF SNIFFING?

Most inhalants depress the central nervous system. They slow down breathing and other body functions.

During and shortly after using, a person usually becomes dizzy and loses muscle coordination. Slowed reflexes, slurred speech, lightheadedness and excitation are common. The user becomes less able to think or act clearly and may become abusive or violent.

Nausea, sneezing, coughing, nosebleeds, fatigue, and loss of appetite are common. The eyes, nose, and mouth are often irritated. Rapid pulse, decreased blood pressure, and headaches are common.

Outward signs of inhalant abuse may include a chemical smell on the breath or clothing, red or runny eyes or nose, spots or sores around the mouth, and containers from the inhaled substance.

## WHAT ARE THE IMMEDIATE RISKS OF SNIFFING INHALANTS?

Sudden death can result in several ways. Spray or liquid may get into the airway, causing suffocation. The gas in some spray cans may freeze the larynx and lungs, also causing suffocation. Breathing can also be stopped when the central nervous system is depressed by levels of the chemicals in the brain. The inhaled substance can also cause death through irregular heart beat (arrhythmia) and heart failure. This is sometimes called “sudden sniffing death.” One study found that almost one third of inhalant deaths were from first-time use.

Finally, death or injury can result from reckless or violent behavior while under the influence, including suicide.

## WHAT LONG-TERM DAMAGE CAN OCCUR?

Studies show many problems with long-term exposure to inhalants. These include damage to the bone marrow (usually linked with benzene), lungs, liver, and kidneys. Brain damage and permanent damage to the central nervous system can occur. Heart damage is also possible.

Other long-term physical effects include tiredness and weight loss. Vision, memory, and the ability to think clearly may be impaired. Hearing loss is possible.

Finally, tolerance to inhalants develops. Both physical and psychological dependence occur.

## WHO ABUSES INHALANTS?

Inhalants are abused by all ages, but most often by young people between the ages of 7 and 17. This may be in part because inhalants are easy to obtain and low in cost. Adults who abuse inhalants usually cannot afford other substances or have developed an inhalant dependency.

Young inhalant abusers most often do so in small groups. Among teenagers, boys are more likely to abuse inhalants regularly (in the past month) than girls, but girls are more likely to have tried inhalants in their lifetime or in the past year. Inhalant abuse occurs most often among youth with poor school attendance and delinquency, low self esteem, and emotional problems. However, abuse occurs among others as well.

Children may misuse inhalant products found around the house unintentionally. Parents should keep these substances away from young children, just as they would other dangerous substances such as alcohol, medicines, and poisons.

## HOW COMMON IS INHALANT ABUSE?

Inhalant use by young people increased each year from 1991 through 1995, especially among younger students. In 1996 and 1997, reported inhalant use decreased for all age groups. In the 1997 "Monitoring the Future" survey of US students, use of inhalants in the past year was reported by 11.8% of eighth graders, 8.7% of tenth graders, and 6.7% of twelfth graders. Inhalant use in the last month was reported by 5.6% of eighth graders, 3.0% of tenth graders, and 2.5 % of twelfth graders.

The 1996 National Household Survey found that among young people aged 12 to 17, 5.9% had used inhalants at some time in their life, 4.0% had used them in the past year, and 1.7% had used them in the past month.

## ARE THERE RISKS IF INHALANTS ARE USED DURING PREGNANCY?

The chemicals which are inhaled are absorbed into the blood stream and cross the placenta to the fetus.

Damage to the fetus is possible.

Animal studies indicate that solvents cause birth defects. Preliminary studies link prenatal exposure to the solvent toluene to nervous system problems, retarded growth, facial abnormalities, and urinary tract disorders.

Women who are pregnant, considering pregnancy, or breastfeeding should not use inhalants.

## LEGAL ISSUES

Since inhalants are legally available for legitimate uses, their control is difficult. Some local governments restrict the sale of model glue or butyl nitrite.

Other methods have been used to limit access to these products, however. For instance, manufacturers of many products have changed their ingredients so that inhaling the products no longer creates a "high." Stores may also restrict sale of such products to minors.

Parents have an important role in discussing with their children the risks of inhaling these chemicals, and in controlling their children's access to these products.

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