

About inhalants



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One thing that all inhalants have in common is that they contain chemicals that were never meant for people to consume. So why would anyone breathe toxic chemicals on purpose? Just like the users of other drugs, inhalant abusers try to get 'high' from the chemicals.

What are the effects of inhalants?

The effects of inhalants usually last only a few minutes, unless users inhale repeatedly. At first, inhalants have a stimulating effect. Then, if the users keep inhaling, they may feel dazed, dizzy and have trouble walking. Sometimes users get aggressive or think that they see things that are not there. Stronger chemicals or repeated inhaling can cause people to pass out. A user can also die suddenly from using inhalants.

When someone uses an inhalant, large amounts of toxic chemicals enter the lungs and pass from the bloodstream into the brain. There they damage and kill brain cells. The amount of fumes a young person inhales greatly exceeds what is considered safe, even in a workplace setting. It may take at least two weeks for the body to get rid of some of the chemicals in inhalants. Inhalants exit the body mainly through exhaling, which is why an inhalant abuser's breath often smells like chemicals. Inhalants also pass out of the body through urine.

Short term effects of inhalants are:

- headaches, nausea, vomiting;
- loss of balance;
- dizziness;
- slurred and slow speech;
- mood changes; and
- hallucinations.

Over time inhalants can cause more serious damage, such as:

- loss of concentration;
- short term memory loss;
- hearing loss;
- muscle spasms;

- permanent brain damage; and
- death.

Common household products inhaled include:

- cooking spray;
- typewriter correction fluid;
- disinfectants;
- fabric protectors;
- felt-tip markers;
- furniture polish and wax;
- oven cleaners;
- air fresheners;
- spray deodorants;
- hair sprays;
- nail polish remover;
- pressurized aerosol sprays;
- butane;
- gasoline;
- glues and adhesives;
- paints and paint thinners;
- refrigerants (Freon);
- rust removers; and
- spray paints.

How do inhalants kill?

No one can predict how much of an inhalant will kill. A young person can use a certain amount one time and seem fine, but his or her next use could be fatal.

The Texas Commission on Drugs and Alcohol Abuse reports the following ways that inhalant can kill.

- Asphyxia – Solvent gases can cause a person to stop breathing from a lack of oxygen.
- Choking – Users can choke on their own vomit.
- Suffocation – This is more common among users who inhale from plastic bags.

A Note From the Doctor

- Injuries – Inhalants can cause people to become careless or aggressive. This often leads to behaviours that can injure or kill, such as operating a motor vehicle dangerously or jumping from great heights. Teens can also get burned or even be killed if someone lights a cigarette while they are ‘huffing’ butane, gasoline or some other flammable substance.
- Suicides – Coming down from an inhalant high causes some people to feel depressed, which may lead them to take their own lives.
- Cardiac arrest – Chemicals from inhalants can make the heart beat very fast and irregularly, then suddenly stop beating. This is called cardiac arrest. One reason why this may happen is that inhalants somehow make the heart extrasensitive to adrenaline. (Adrenaline is a hormone that the body produces, usually in response to fear, excitement or surprise.) A sudden rush of adrenaline combined with inhalants can make the heart stop instantly. This ‘sudden sniffing death’ is responsible for more than half of all deaths due to inhalant abuse.

Another very real danger of inhalants is that they often lead young people to try other drugs whose effects are even more intense and last longer.

Excerpts reprinted with permission from Inhalant Abuse: Your Child and Drugs, Guidelines for Parents (Elk Grove Village: American Academy of Pediatrics, 1996).

For more information on inhalant abuse contact:

- Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, telephone 416-535-8501, Web site www.camh.net
- Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse, telephone 613-235-4048, Web site www.ccsa.ca
- First Nations and Inuit Health Programs, National Clearinghouse Catalogue, telephone 613-954-5810, Web site www.hc-sc.gc.ca/msb/fnihp/clearinghouseindex.htm
- Your local poison control office

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Also available at www.caringforkids.cps.ca

Canadian Paediatric Society, 2204 Walkley Road, Suite 100, Ottawa, Ontario K1G 4G8,
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