

FACT SHEET

Inhalants

The term “inhalants” refers to chemical vapours or gases that produce a “high” when they are breathed in. Most of the substances used as inhalants, such as glue, gasoline, cleaning solvents and aerosols, have legitimate everyday uses, but they were never meant for human consumption. Inhalants are cheap, legal and easy to get. They have a high potential for abuse - especially by children and young adults. Several breaths of solvents will produce a high within a few minutes of use. This high may last up to 45 minutes, if no more breaths are taken. Some people continue to take additional breaths to sustain the effects for several hours. As the effects wear off, the person may feel drowsy and have a hangover with a mild-to-severe headache for up to several days.

There are four main types of inhalants:

1. **Volatile solvents:** These are the most commonly abused type of inhalants. “Volatile” means they evaporate when exposed to air, and “solvent” means they dissolve many other substances. Examples of solvents used as inhalants include benzene, toluene, xylene, acetone, naphtha

and hexane. Products such as gasoline, cleaning fluids, paint thinners, hobby glue, correction fluid and felt-tip markers contain a mixture of different types of solvents.

2. **Aerosol or spray cans:** Hair spray, spray paint, cooking spray and other aerosol products contain pressurized liquids or gases such as fluorocarbon and butane. Some aerosol products also contain solvents.
3. **Gases:** This includes some medical anesthetics, such as nitrous oxide (“laughing gas”), chloroform, halothane and ether, as well as gases found in commercially available products, such as butane lighters and propane tanks.
4. **Nitrites:** Amyl nitrite, butyl nitrite and cyclohexyl nitrite (also known as “poppers”) are different from other inhalants in effect and availability. They are sold as “room odourizer” or “video head cleaner.” Amyl nitrite is used medically to treat cyanide poisoning.

Most of the people who use solvents and aerosols are young - between 10 and 16 years old. Many try

inhalants only once or twice, or use them only on occasion. However, some people use heavily and may continue using into adulthood.

Effects of Short-Term Use

While using inhalants a person may experience:

- an immediate and brief intoxication
- a distortion of perception
- drowsiness
- euphoria and exhilaration
- vivid fantasies
- dizziness and nausea
- vomiting and blurred vision
- sneezing, coughing and staggering
- slow reflexes and sensitivity to light

** Nitrous oxide produces a dreamy mental state, loss of motor control, hallucinations and an increased threshold for pain. Sniffing pure nitrous oxide starves the body of oxygen. Some people have died this way.*

CONTINUED »



Saskatchewan
Ministry of
Health

Effects of Long-Term Use

People who use solvents regularly for a long time can damage their liver, kidneys, lungs, heart, brain, bones and blood. Sometimes this damage heals when drug use is stopped; sometimes it is permanent. High levels of nitrous oxide use, even with adequate oxygen, has been shown to damage nerves. This can cause numbness, weakness and loss of balance.

Other effects of long-term use include:

- bloodshot eyes, sores on the nose and mouth
- nosebleeds and pale skin
- excessive thirst and weight loss
- confused, tired, depressed
- irritable, hostile and paranoid
- trouble concentrating
- trouble remembering and thinking clearly
- permanent hearing loss
- damage to bone marrow
- heavy solvent use can result in numbness, weakness, tremors and a lack of co-ordination in the arms and legs

Inhalants and Dependency

Most inhalant use is experimental and occasional. However, people who use inhalants regularly can develop “tolerance.” This means that more and more of the substance is needed to produce the same effects. Regular use also leads to a persistent craving for the high, which makes it hard to stop using. When regular use is stopped, withdrawal symptoms may include nausea, loss of appetite, tremors, anxiety, depression and paranoia.

Sources:

- Centre for Addictions and Mental Health (CAMH)