



Mental Health  
Commission



**Volatile Substance Use**

# **Information about Inhalants**

for parents and families



## What is inhalant use?

Inhalant use is deliberate inhalation of the gas, fumes or vapour from certain products to get a 'high' or feel intoxicated. It's also called 'volatile substance use' or 'solvent use' and is commonly referred to as 'sniffing' or 'chroming'.

## What products are commonly inhaled?

There are hundreds of products that can be inhaled for the purpose of intoxication, many of which can be found in or around the home or purchased from stores or online.

**Products that are more commonly inhaled include:**

- glue
- aerosol sprays
- paint and spray paints
- petrol
- butane gas (cigarette lighter refills)
- nitrous oxide (gas bulbs for whipping cream, known as 'nangs')
- toluene/other solvents (i.e. paint removers/thinners etc).

## How are inhalants used?

Inhalant products can be inhaled either directly into the mouth or nose from their container or through a cloth, or sprayed or poured into a plastic bag or bottle.

## How common is inhalant use?

Most people will never use inhalants. Of the small number of people that do, most will only try it once or twice and stop due to the unpleasant effects. Inhalant use commonly occurs among young people between 12 and 15 years and then decreases with age. The majority of people stop using after a short period, with only a small percentage continuing on to long-term use.

## Why do people use inhalants?

Taking risks and experimenting are a normal part of being a teenager. During this time, teenagers may experiment with inhalants or other drugs. Each person's reasons for trying or using inhalants are different and there is often more than one reason.

### **These reasons can include:**

- to experiment/out of curiosity
- for fun/excitement
- to escape/block out problems
- fitting in with a peer group
- boredom
- they are cheap, legal and easy to get
- if they can't get alcohol.

# What are the effects of inhalant use?

Inhalants have a depressant effect on the body. This means they slow down the activity of the brain and nervous system and can cause the heart and breathing to slow down. They also affect the person's thoughts, feelings and judgement.

The effects of inhalants usually occur within a few minutes and only last a few minutes, which is why some people inhale repeatedly to lengthen the period of intoxication.

Inhaling will cause the person to feel light-headed and relaxed, very similar to the feeling of being drunk. The person using may giggle, have poor coordination, slurred speech, blurred vision and feel drowsy. While sometimes people feel relaxed, happy or excited, others may feel agitated or uneasy.

Using a lot in a short period can cause the person to feel confused, hallucinate (see or hear things that are not really there) and even black out.

## **A range of other effects can occur including:**

- headaches
- nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea
- bloodshot eyes
- sneezing, coughing and a runny nose
- changes in thinking and judgement
- feeling less shy, which can lead to risky or dangerous behaviour.

Headaches and feeling 'hungover' are also common and can last for several days. Those who use regularly over a long period may also have difficulty thinking, concentrating and remembering things, mood changes (irritability, depression), stomach issues, chronic headache and cough, weight loss, muscle weakness and feel tired a lot.

# What are the signs to look for?

There is no list of signs or symptoms to say that someone is definitely using inhalants. Many of the signs could also be changes in behaviour that are normal for teenagers. These may include changes in mood and attitude, problems at school and changing friends. Any obvious changes in behaviour should be talked about, however it is important that you avoid jumping to conclusions.

## **Some signs that may be related to inhalant use include:**

- finding unusual amounts of glues, cigarette lighter refill, solvents or aerosols in the person's possession
- chemical smells on their clothes or breath
- 'drunken' behaviour
- loss of appetite
- anxiety, irritability or excitability
- sores around their mouth and nose.

# What are the harms?

Harms from inhalant use depend on several factors, including who is using; the inhalant being used; how it is used and the environment it is being used in.

While short-term use of inhalants are unlikely to cause much damage to the body or brain, there are other serious risks associated with all inhalant use (see below). Most physical damage from inhalant use appears to be reversible once the person stops using, however some damage may be permanent, particularly if use is heavy over a long period of time.

**The main harms to be aware of are outlined below:**

## Accidents

When a person is 'high' on inhalants they are less aware of what they are doing and accidents can occur from walking near traffic, drowning, falling from high places, or other risky behaviours.

As most inhalant products are flammable, there is also a high risk of burns and explosions.

If a person becomes unconscious, there is the risk of choking on their vomit or suffocating if they are using a plastic bag to inhale.

Spraying some substances directly into the nose or mouth can be very dangerous as this can freeze the throat and airways and cause the person to suffocate.

## Overdose

As the person will feel the effects of inhalants very quickly, it is difficult for them to know when they have had too much.

Mixing with other drugs will also increase the risk of overdose.

## Sudden sniffing death

This is very rare but important to know about. Some inhalants, particularly aerosols and butane gas, can cause what is known as 'sudden sniffing death'.

The chemicals in these products can cause heart failure if the person is stressed or does heavy exercise during, or soon after, use.



**For this reason it is important not to chase or frighten anyone who may be using inhalants.**

Inhalant use can cause death the first time someone uses, or after using many times.



# Inhalants and the law

Using and possessing inhalants is not illegal, as the products themselves, such as paint, glue and aerosols, are not illegal. However, there are still laws that relate to inhalant use.

- The **Protective Custody Act 2000** allows police to confiscate intoxicating substances from juveniles and to place an intoxicated person into protective custody in an approved facility until a parent, guardian or responsible person is found.
- Under **Section 206 of the WA Criminal Code**, it is illegal to sell or supply inhalants to someone where it is reasonable to suspect that they will be used for the purpose of intoxication.
- The Western Australia **Medicines and Poisons Regulations 2016** restricts the sale of nitrous oxide products to approved recipients only (eg: registered food businesses). This means they are not available to general public.

## Common reactions to inhalant use

When parents suspect their young person may be using inhalants, the first reaction may be to panic, followed by anger and worry. This is a normal response.

Being a parent of a young person can be hard. It can be difficult to achieve the balance between allowing them to mature and gain independence, while maintaining a level of protection and control.

Regardless of your parenting style, many young people will experiment with new experiences. While parents and families are very important and influential in a young person's life, being a teenager is a time when experimentation and risk-taking is more likely, and fitting in with their peers is of great importance.

It is normal to react in a variety of ways to your young person using inhalants and it is a good idea to ask for support. There is information about where you can get help at the end of this booklet.

## What to do if you find your young person using inhalants?

Although you may be feeling angry, upset or frightened, try to keep calm.

- Make sure the environment is safe and offer help.
- Reassure them and stay with them until they have sobered up.
- Do not talk to them about their inhalant use straight away.
- Where possible, try to find out what they have been using (by looking for evidence around them) as this will help you to talk to them later about the harms.
- Never chase or frighten them as this may lead to 'sudden sniffing death'.

## As a parent how can I help?

There are a range of reactions and responses parents have if they suspect or discover their young person is using inhalants. All of them are normal.

However, some responses are more helpful than others when talking about inhalant use.

### Some helpful approaches include:

- talking to your young person. Let them know your concerns and invite them to talk about it with you when things are calm and they are not intoxicated.
- listening to what they have to say and respect their point of view. This will help them share their thoughts and feelings. Young people need to talk through the consequences of their actions and make their own decisions. Try to understand them.
- showing concern by offering your support. Let them know you have some information about inhalant use that may be helpful to them. Try not to provide all the answers or focus only on what you are worried about.
- offering the opportunity to hear their reasons for using, if they are able to tell you. It can be very difficult to listen openly to this. However, you can use this opportunity to make them aware of the effect it is having on their life and those around them.
- being honest about your values and open about your concerns. This way they will understand that you care about them. Explain it's the behaviour of sniffing that you don't approve of and not them.



- trying to include the following in your approach: negotiation, positive role modelling and being consistent. This will create opportunities for respect and understanding. Knowing who your young person is with and what they are doing, and having contact with the parents of their friends is also helpful.
- being aware of your own alcohol and/or drug use when talking about their use. They may not want to listen to you and your suggestions if you use drugs or alcohol yourself.
- taking care of yourself and asking for help if you need it. There are services listed at the end of this booklet that can help.

## Talking about inhalant use

Talking about drug use with young people can be hard but maintaining connection and communication is important. One way you might want to bring up the topic is to ask your young person if they are using inhalants by saying what you have noticed and what your worries are.

Using an “I” statement will help you express your feelings about the situation by linking it to the behaviour and the possible consequences of that behaviour.

### For example:

*“John, I see you have a lot of glue in your room and I have noticed a chemical smell on you recently. I’m worried that you might be sniffing glue and that this may affect your health.”*

## Not-so-helpful approaches

There are a lot of ways that we can talk with young people that may not be helpful.

**Some examples of these might include:**

- **WARNING** – “you had better stop using or else...” or “if you don’t stop using...”
- **ORDERING** – “you must...” or “you should...” or “you have to...”
- **MORALISING** – “you should just do what is right...”
- **LECTURING** – “you need to understand that...”
- **INTERROGATING** – “why...?” “what...?” “where...?” “when...?” “how...?” “who...?”
- **JUDGING** – “you’re being stupid...”
- **PUT-DOWNS** – “you might think you know it all but you don’t ...” or “you’re so irresponsible...”
- **ULTIMATUMS** – “If you don’t stop, I’ll throw you out...” (this approach can backfire).

# How to reduce risks


While it is fair enough to ask them to stop using inhalants, this may not happen.

Understanding and finding a way to talk about the risks can help them stay safe. This is not saying that it is ok but is a way of helping to protect them if they are going to use anyway, even though you want them to stop.

A good way to start is to ask them what risks they know about and what they can do to reduce them.

**If they can't think of any, the following may be helpful:**

RISKS	WAYS TO REDUCE RISKS
<b>Accidents</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Do not use in dangerous places (such as near roads, near water, or in small/confined spaces)</li></ul>
<b>Suffocation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Do not put plastic bags over the head or lie down when inhaling.</li><li>Do not spray substances directly into the mouth – sniff through a cloth.</li></ul>
<b>Burns/Explosions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Do not use near fire or open flames (such as cigarette lighters or campfires etc).</li></ul>
<b>Overdose</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Do not mix with other drugs (such as alcohol or medications). Do not use alone. Ensure someone else is there in case something goes wrong - they can help or call for help.</li></ul>
<b>Death</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Avoid aerosols and butane gas as they can kill.</li><li>Do not exercise during or soon after using.</li><li>Call an ambulance if someone is unconscious or when something doesn't seem right.</li><li>Learn first aid.</li></ul>

 **However, the best way to avoid risks from inhalant use is to not use at all.**

# How to help in an emergency

If someone is unconscious from using inhalants:

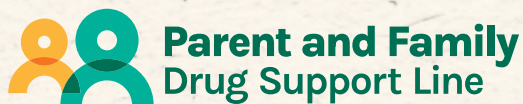
- **DANGER** – remove anything dangerous near them and make sure there is plenty of fresh air
- **RESPONSE** – check for a response
- **SEND** – for help. Call an ambulance on 000 (triple zero)
- **AIRWAY** – roll them onto their side and clear their airway
- **BREATHING** – check for breathing, if not breathing commence CPR
- **CPR** – 30 chest compressions to 2 breaths until medical help arrives
- **DEFIBRILLATION** – use defibrillator if available (if no explosive gas/liquid is on/near the person)

## Help for those who have been using long-term

Quitting inhalant use can be hard for someone who has been using for a long time. Stopping suddenly may cause withdrawal symptoms including depression, anxiety, headaches, sweating, tiredness, difficulty sleeping, shakiness/tremors, nausea/vomiting, loss of appetite and muscle cramps.

There are many alcohol and drug services that can help people control or stop their use of inhalants. Help is also available for parents and carers. For information on services that can help, call one of the numbers on the next page.

# For further information or advice



**9442 5050 or 1800 653 203 (country callers)**

The **Parent and Family Drug Support Line (PFDSL)** is a confidential, non-judgemental telephone counselling, information and referral service for anyone concerned about someone else's alcohol and/or other drug use.

Callers have the option to talk to a qualified counsellor or a parent and family peer volunteer.



**(08) 9442 5000 or 1800 198 024 (country callers)**

The **Alcohol and Drug Support Line (ADSL)** is a confidential, non-judgemental telephone counselling, information and referral service for anyone seeking help for their own or someone else's alcohol and/or other drug use. The ADSL also offer a free callback service. The ADSL provides support to health professionals working with individuals and families impacted by alcohol and/or other drug use.



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