

# Inhalant Abuse



## What are Inhalants?

Inhalants are breathable chemical vapors that produce mind-altering effects. Inhaling these chemical vapors is commonly called "sniffing," "snorting," "bagging," or "huffing."

A variety of readily available products found in the home and in the workplace contain substances that can be inhaled. Inhalants fall into the following categories.

**Volatile solvents** are liquids that vaporize at room temperature. They are found in paint thinners or removers, degreasers, dry-cleaning fluids and office supply solvents such as correction fluids, felt-tip-marker fluid, and electronic contact cleaners.

**Aerosols** are sprays that contain propellants and solvents. They include spray paints, deodorant and hair sprays, vegetable oil sprays for cooking, and fabric protector sprays.

**Gases** are contained in products like butane lighters, propane tanks, whipped cream aerosols or dispensers, and refrigerant gases. Medical anesthetic gases include ether, chloroform, halothane, and nitrous oxide. Nitrous oxide commonly referred to as "laughing gas" is the most abused of these gases.

**Nitrites** are a special class of inhalants. While other inhalants are used to alter mood, organic nitrites are used primarily as sexual enhancers.

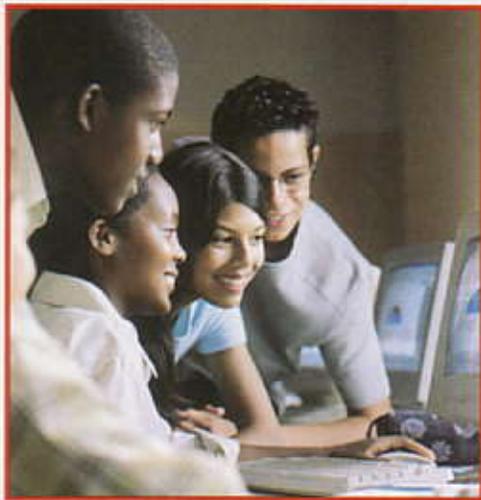
Nitrites include cyclohexyl, butyl, and amyl nitrites, and are commonly known as "poppers" or "snappers." Amyl nitrite is still used in some medical diagnostic procedures even though nitrites are now prohibited by the Consumer Product Safety Commission. Volatile nitrites are often sold in small brown bottles and labeled as "video head cleaner," "room odorizer," "leather cleaner," or "liquid aroma."

## Who Abuses Inhalants?

We do not think of products, such as paints, glues, and cleaning fluids, as drugs. Yet, young children and adolescents can easily obtain them and are among those most likely to abuse these extremely toxic substances. Abusers typically start experimenting around the age of eight years old. Inhalants are inviting to abusers, especially children, because they are legal substances, readily available, and inexpensive. In most cases parent's unfamiliarity with the product's potential for inhalation abuse increases the attraction. Many youth say they began sniffing when they were in grade school. They start because they feel inhalants cannot hurt them. Once hooked, these abusers find it a tough habit to break.

• According to the 2003 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, approximately 23 million Americans ages 12 and older reported trying inhalants at least once during their lifetime, representing 9.7% of the population ages 12 and older.

• Among students surveyed as part of the 2004 Monitoring the Future study, 17.3% of eighth graders, 12.4% of tenth graders, and 10.9% of twelfth graders reported using inhalants at least once during their lifetimes.



Many abusers have friends or siblings who encourage their use of inhalants. Some youth with no apparent social, mental, or home-life problems try inhalants because they think it is funny to act and speak strangely — just like breathing from a helium balloon makes a person's voice squeaky and high pitched. They don't realize that inhalants can kill them or cause permanent damage the first time they try it.

## What Are The Dangers?

Every year young people in the United States die of inhalant abuse. Hundreds suffer severe consequences such as permanent brain damage. Sniffing highly concentrated amounts of the chemicals in sol-

vents or aerosol sprays can directly induce heart failure and death within minutes of an inhalation. This syndrome, known as "sudden sniffing death," can result even the first time inhalants are used. High concentrations of inhalants cause death from suffocation by displacing oxygen in the lungs and then in the central nervous system so that breathing stops. Also, they coat the air sacs in the lungs with a sticky substance blocking oxygen absorption.

Nearly all inhalants produce short-term effects similar to depressants, which slow down bodily functions. Inhaled vapors are absorbed through the lungs into the bloodstream and rapidly reach the brain. When inhaled in sufficient amounts, inhalants cause intoxication, usually lasting only a few minutes. Users sometime extend this effect for several hours by repeatedly breathing inhalants. Initially, users may feel slightly stimulated. Repeated inhalations make them feel less inhibited and less in control. In large amounts, inhalants cause a user to become

intoxicated much like the effects of alcoholic beverages. Alcohol-like effects include slurred speech, muscle weakness, belligerence, and apathy. The abuser may exhibit poor judgment and hyperactivity. Individuals may laugh and giggle, become dizzy, experience a floating sensation and hallucinations. As tolerance for inhalants develops, users sniff more frequently and with increased use the person becomes drowsy. If the user continues, they can lose consciousness, have breathing problems and die.

### INHALANT ABUSE CAN CAUSE:

- Hearing loss
- Limb spasms
- Central nervous system damage
- Brain damage
- Bone marrow damage
- Liver and kidney damage
- Suffocation
- Coma
- Death

## SIGNS OF INHALANT ABUSE

Early identification and intervention are the best ways to stop inhalant abuse. Be alert to the following signs:

- » Chemical odors on breath or clothing
- » Paint or other stains on face, hands, or clothes
- » Hidden paint or solvent containers and chemical-soaked rags
- » Drunk or disoriented appearance
- » Slurred speech
- » Nausea or loss of appetite
- » Inattentiveness, lack of coordination, irritability, and depression