

learn about inhalants



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What are inhalants?

Inhalants are products that give off chemical vapours. When a person purposely inhales the vapours, they may feel temporarily light-headed and giddy. Repeated large doses can make a person feel and act as if they have been drinking alcohol.

Many inhalants, including hairspray and hobby glue, are everyday products that people use at home, school or work. They are not meant for human consumption. Some inhalants, however, were originally intended for medical purposes. Nitrous oxide (laughing gas), for example, was and is still used as an anesthetic during operations. Likewise, nitrites (also known as “poppers” in the club scene) were intended for use in treating cyanide poisoning and angina.

While there are hundreds of different examples of inhalants, most fit into four main categories:

Volatile solvents (substances that evaporate when exposed to air and are used to dissolve other substances).

Some of the products that contain volatile solvents are:

- gasoline
- paint thinner
- glue
- correction fluid
- felt-tip markers

Spray cans (pressurized liquids). The sprays most commonly used as inhalants are:

- hair spray
- cooking spray
- spray paint

Gases (used for medical or household purposes). The most commonly inhaled gases are:

- nitrous oxide (laughing gas)
- chloroform
- butane
- propane

Nitrites (chemical compounds that come in small glass vials). Often nitrites are sold as room odourizers.

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Inhalants are used in many ways. Solvents, for example, are usually “bagged.” People put them in a bag, close the bag around their mouth and nose and then breathe in the fumes. Some inhalants are “huffed.” People pour the inhalant onto a cloth, hold the cloth up to their face and breathe in the fumes.

Gases used for medical purposes are contained in tanks or dispensers and are inhaled through tubes or balloons. Nitrites are usually “sniffed.” They are either inhaled directly from the small glass vials they come in or huffed from a cloth.

How do inhalants work?

All inhalants are absorbed through the lungs and travel quickly through the bloodstream to the brain. This creates an immediate but brief feeling of intoxication.

Inhalants have different effects on different people depending on the type of inhalant

- dosage,
- setting or environment,
- person’s history of inhalant use, and
- person’s biochemistry.

Solvents produce an alcohol-like effect lasting up to 45 minutes. Users may have a distorted perception of shapes, colours, time and space. This is usually followed by an hour or two of drowsiness. Nitrous oxide produces a dream-like state and loss of motor control that lasts a few minutes. Nitrites cause blood to move quickly to the brain producing an immediate “rush” that lasts a few minutes.

Why do people use inhalants?

Inhalants are most popular among young people between 10 and 16 years old. Often they try inhalants only once or twice to see what the experience feels like. Inhalants are inexpensive, legal and easy to access. Their effects last a short time. These factors make using inhalants attractive to pre-teens and early teens.

Some people who use inhalants regularly may become dependent on the way substances make them feel. They may find themselves using inhalants even when they don’t want to. People who use inhalants regularly are most often in their twenties.

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For some people, solvent use is a form of escape from things they don't like in their lives. Young people with certain risk factors are more likely to use inhalants than others. These include

- poverty,
- problems at school,
- a lack of opportunities for success,
- problems at home, and
- high incidence of substance use in the family.

Nitrites are commonly used as a club drug because they create a rush (when blood rushes to the head) and enhance the clubbing experience. Nitrites are also popular among men who have sex with men because of the way they relax smooth muscles in the body, improve blood flow and enhance sexual experiences.

What are the risks and health effects of using inhalants?

Generally speaking, inhalant use can produce a number of effects in varying degrees of severity:

- lowered inhibition and reckless behaviour
- exhilaration ("high")
- clumsiness and slurred words
- difficulty making sensible decisions
- fatigue
- ringing in the ears, dizziness and blurred vision
- nervousness and disorientation

- headaches and chest or stomach pains
- nausea and vomiting
- weak muscles and difficulty speaking
- hallucinations
- psychosis
- aggression and violence

Drug use of any kind can be dangerous for young people (particularly those under 16). It can interfere with a teen's mental and emotional development.

People who use inhalants run the risk of sudden death through sniffing. Prolonged use of highly concentrated inhalants can cause a rapid, irregular heartbeat, resulting in heart failure.

People who use inhalants regularly over a long period of time can have permanent health problems including memory loss, brain damage, personality changes, muscular weakness, fatigue, and nerve damage starting in the hands and feet.

When is using inhalants a problem?

Whenever a person's drug use negatively affects their life or the lives of others, they have a problem with the drug.

Using inhalants is especially risky when a person is

- ***near open flames.*** Inhalants catch fire easily. To prevent the risk of burns, people who use inhalants should avoid lighters, bonfires or any type of flame.
- ***alone.*** Sometimes people pass out while sniffing solvents from a plastic bag. If the bag stays in place, the person can suffocate from lack of oxygen.
- ***mixing substances.*** Inhalants have a slowing effect on the body. Using another depressant such as alcohol or sleeping pills at the same time could be fatal.
- ***pregnant.*** Using solvents while pregnant may result in premature birth. Babies of solvent-using mothers may have long-term neurodevelopmental impairments, such as difficulties with thinking, speech and motor skills.

Did you know?

Among street-involved youth, about 22 per cent have used inhalants at least once in their lives.

Approximately 2 per cent of BC youth have used inhalants at some point in their lives.

Unlike alcohol and other drugs, solvent-use rates peak in early teen years and decrease in high school years.

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Regular use of inhalants can lead to tolerance. This means the person needs more and more of a substance to feel the desired effects. Using larger amounts of any substance increases the risk of problems.

Heavy use of inhalants can lead to emotional dependence. This means that using inhalants becomes more important than relationships, school or work and other aspects of normal everyday life.

Heavy use can also cause physical dependence, meaning that the person experiences withdrawal symptoms when they stop using inhalants. The symptoms include

- irritability,
- restlessness,
- depression,
- fatigue,
- aggression,
- chills,
- headaches, and
- hallucinations.

Are inhalants illegal?

Inhalants are legal in British Columbia as most are compounds within commonly used products such as hairspray or whipped cream. Some retailers voluntarily limit access to these products

What to do if you or someone you know is experiencing a problem with inhalants

For information on treatment options and resources throughout BC, call

***Alcohol and Drug Information
and Referral Service***

1-800-663-1441 (throughout BC)

604-660-9382 (in Greater Vancouver)

For information on ways to help yourself with a substance use problem, see the Here to Help website: www.heretohelp.bc.ca. The website also features detailed information on substances and mental health concerns.

You can also find information on a wide variety of substance use issues on the Canadian Institute for Substance Use Research, website: cisur.ca.

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