
Inhalants

Summary

- Inhalants are chemical substances that give off fumes and are sometimes inhaled to achieve a 'high'.
 - The typical user is a teenager in their first few years of high school.
 - Long-term use can lead to a range of health problems, such as anaemia, brain damage and kidney damage.
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What are inhalants?

Inhalants are chemical substances that give off fumes or vapours at room temperature. Breathing in these fumes produces euphoric feelings or a 'high', similar to intoxication with alcohol or cannabis (marijuana). However, using inhalants on a regular basis can lead to significant health problems, including liver, kidney and brain damage, and even death. Inhalants are also known as volatile substances or solvents.

'Chroming' (inhaling aerosol spray paint) and petrol sniffing are two forms of inhalant misuse that are currently common in Australia, particularly among some young people. Most inhalants are familiar household or everyday products that are dangerous when misused.

Who uses inhalants?

The typical inhalant user is a teenager in the first few years of secondary school. According to a 2014 survey of Australian secondary school students:

- 15.9 per cent of students aged 12 to 17 years had used inhalants at least once
- 11.4 per cent of students aged 12 to 17 years had used inhalants in the previous 12 months
- just under half of the students who had used inhalants in the past year used them only once or twice, and 19 per cent of males and 15 per cent of females reported using them 10 or more times in that time period.

Some people use inhalants such as amyl nitrite or nitrous oxide to heighten their experience when they go out to party.

How inhalants work

Inhalants are nervous system depressants. This means they slow down the workings of the brain. When inhaled, the fumes enter the bloodstream very quickly and the effects are felt after just a few seconds.

The effects of inhalants mimic alcohol (another depressant), but are much quicker because the chemicals are sent straight to the blood through the lungs, instead of through the stomach. A headache usually follows.

Types of inhalants

Most inhalants are not banned drugs, but legal, everyday products used in an unsafe way. Inhalants may be solvents, gases, aerosols or nitrites. Commonly used inhalants include:

- aerosol products (such as spray paint)
 - petrol (gasoline)
 - glues (adhesives)
 - paint and paint thinners
 - hair spray
 - cleaning fluid
 - gas from lighters or barbecues (butane)
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- nail polish remover
- felt pens
- cooking spray
- correction fluid
- oven cleaners
- nitrous oxide
- nitrites such as amyl, butyl and isobutyl nitrite (collectively known as alkyl nitrites or poppers).

Chroming

Inhalant use is often generally referred to as 'chroming', but chroming is only one of a number of methods commonly used. Chroming involves spraying (chrome) paint from an aerosol can into a plastic bag and then breathing in the vapours from the bag. Chroming has been identified as the most common form of inhalant misuse in Australia.

Petrol sniffing

Petrol sniffing typically involves a small amount of fuel being placed in a can and inhaled. Some petrol sniffers engage in experimental or recreational use. Chronic sniffers engage in more frequent and intensive petrol sniffing, and are more likely to suffer serious long-term effects.

Nitrous oxide

Nitrous oxide gas is typically inhaled by discharging nitrous gas cartridges (bulbs or whippets) into another object, such as a balloon, or directly into the mouth. Inhaling nitrous oxide produces a rapid rush of euphoria and feeling of floating or excitement for a short period of time. Inhaling a large amount of nitrous oxide can result in loss of blood pressure, fainting or heart attack. It can also be fatal if you don't get enough oxygen (known as hypoxia).

Long-term nitrous oxide inhalation can result in a variety of side effects, including memory loss, brain damage, incontinence, a weakened immune system, and psychosis.

Effects of inhalants

The effects of inhalants depend on the substance, the strength of the dose, the physical make-up of the user and their state of mind at the time.

Generally, some of the common effects of inhalants include:

- feelings of excitement and euphoria
- fewer inhibitions
- loss of coordination
- risk-taking behaviour
- dizziness
- sneezing and coughing
- watering eyes
- running nose.

Inhalants and other drugs

Taking other drugs with inhalants – including over-the-counter or prescribed medications – can be dangerous. Using inhalants with other depressant drugs such as alcohol, benzodiazepines or opiates places enormous strain on the body, which can affect breathing rate and may increase the risk of passing out and suffocating, or choking on vomit.

Overdose and inhalant-related death

In high doses, inhalants can cause disorientation, nausea, diarrhoea and nose bleeds. The symptoms of overdose include hallucinations, drowsiness and coma.

Some inhalant-related deaths are thought to have been caused by a condition called 'sudden sniffing syndrome'.

This is a type of heart failure that can occur if the user attempts any physical exertion after inhaling.

Users have also been accidentally killed by engaging in risky behaviours, such as jumping off high buildings while under the influence.

Inhalant dependence, tolerance and withdrawal

Users can develop a psychological dependence on inhalants. However, research suggests that the risk of physical dependence is relatively small. Withdrawal symptoms are usually mild, but can include depression, anxiety, loss of appetite, dizziness, tremors and nausea.

Health effects of long-term inhalant use

Using inhalants on a regular basis can lead to significant health problems, including:

- anaemia
- weight loss
- muscle tremors
- irritability
- memory problems and other cognitive difficulties
- chemical poisoning, which can lead to brain, liver and kidney damage.

Inhalant emergencies

If someone you are with overdoses or has a bad reaction while using inhalants, call triple zero (000) for an ambulance immediately. A quick response can save the person's life. Don't delay because you think you or your friend might get into trouble. Ambulance officers do not have to call the police.

Stay with the person until the ambulance arrives and tell the ambulance officers as much as you can about what drugs were taken, how long ago and any pre-existing medical conditions the person may have.

Where to get help

- In an emergency, call triple zero (000)
- Your **GP (doctor)**
- **DrugInfo** Tel. **1300 85 85 84** – information and referral services for anyone seeking help for alcohol or drug use
- **DirectLine** Tel. **1800 888 236** – for 24-hour confidential drug and alcohol telephone counselling, information and referral
- **Youth Drug and Alcohol Advice (YoDAA)** service Tel. **1800 458 685** – for information, counselling and referral to youth-specific alcohol and other drug services
- **Family Drug Help** Tel. **1300 660 068**

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