



# instarts

# inhalants

## WHAT ARE INHALANTS?

Inhalants are a range of products that are sniffed or inhaled to give the user an immediate head rush or 'high'. These substances are easily absorbed through the lungs and carried to the brain, where they act to slow down the central nervous system.

Many familiar household products are inhalants. Some of the most common are:

- Glue
- Aerosol spray cans
- Cleaning fluids
- Felt-tipped pens
- Correction fluid (liquid paper)
- Chrome-based paints
- Paint or paint thinner
  - Petrol
  - Anaesthetics

Many inhalants are classified as volatile solvents. These change rapidly from a liquid or semi-solid state to a gas when exposed to air. They include chemicals that are found in products such as deodorants, air fresheners, lighter fuels and propellant gases used in aerosols such as whipped cream dispensers. Some volatile solvents are inhaled because of the effects produced not only by the product's main ingredient, but by the propellant gases, as in aerosols, such as hair spray.

Other solvents found in aerosol products such as gold and silver spray paint are sniffed not because of the effects from propellant gases but because of the psychoactive effects caused by the specific solvents necessary to suspend these metallic paints in the spray. The sniffing of metallic paints is known as 'chroming'.

Another category of inhalant is the nitrites. Amyl, butyl and isobutyl nitrite (collectively known as alkyl nitrites) are clear, yellow liquids which are inhaled for their intoxicating effects. There are many different brand names and the liquid may be inhaled either straight from the bottle or from a cloth. Nitrites tend to have a sweet odour when fresh but this tends to turn to a 'dirty socks' smell when stale.

Amyl nitrite was discovered in 1857 and used to ease chest pains (angina). In recent years it has been replaced by other medicines and its only remaining medical use is as an antidote for cyanide poisoning. Nitrites became popular in showbiz circles in the 1950s and as a street drug in America in the 1960s. Butyl nitrite has no medical uses. The drug first became popular in Australia on the disco/club scene of the 1970s and then at dance and rave venues in the 1980s and 1990s, usually in combination with other drugs.

## HOW DO PEOPLE USE INHALANTS?

People use these products by inhaling them through the nose or mouth. The inhalant can be sprayed into a plastic bag, poured into a bottle or soaked onto a cloth before being inhaled. It can also be inhaled directly from the container. Sometimes it is sprayed directly into the mouth or nose. This method is very dangerous because it can paralyse wind passages and cause suffocation.

## WHY DO PEOPLE SNIFF INHALANTS?

The reasons that young people use inhalants are often very similar to the reasons adults give for using alcohol and tobacco. The main reason is usually to have fun or pleasure. One of the main reasons that we do not see many long-term users of inhalants is that the effects are not often regarded as pleasurable by young users. Many of them experience bad headaches after use and often this 'hangover effect' is an unpleasant enough experience for them not to use again.

Inhalants are often regarded as an alternative to alcohol, as the effects are quite similar. It also needs to be remembered that many of these products

are easily available, legal and cheap to purchase which makes experimentation by young people far easier.

Nitrites have historically been used by certain groups to enhance sexual experience. People using nitrites for sexual pleasure often report a prolonged sensation of orgasm and prevention of premature ejaculation, although some men have also reported problems achieving an erection. Nitrites also relax the anal muscles making anal intercourse easier. However, the fact that some people use nitrites for sexual pleasure may make it more difficult to practice safer sex whilst high.

## ARE THERE INHALANTS THAT ARE USED MEDICALLY?

There are a number of anaesthetics that are experimented with by inhalant users. Nitrous oxide (N<sub>2</sub>O) or 'laughing gas' as it is often called, is the most popular and is a colourless gas which is often described as sweet smelling. When used alone nitrous oxide is incapable of being used as an anaesthetic. However, when mixed with oxygen it has proved to be useful in a range of surgical procedures, particularly dental surgery and obstetrics. It is also used in the food industry, as a gas in bottled whipped cream, and in the automotive industry, to enhance engine performance.

Nitrous oxide is the mildest of the anaesthetics and it is used because it produces mild euphoria and a reduction of inhibitions, like other inhalants. However, these effects are followed by drowsiness as the amount used increases. Other anaesthetics produce the same effects, but will put the user to sleep at lower levels.

## WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF INHALANTS?

Sniffing inhalants is a bit like getting drunk. The sniffer feels light-headed, dizzy and happy. It can make you giggle. Speech is slurred and the sniffer may see double. It might be difficult to stand up properly. First-time users often feel sick and drowsy. This puts off

many people from doing it again. Some sniffers report having hallucinations – seeing things that are not there – like spiders and snakes. These effects happen almost straight away and can last up to half an hour.

Other effects include:

- Flu-like symptoms – the user may experience sneezing, coughing or a runny nose, like having a cold or the flu
- Sickness and diarrhoea
- Unpleasant breath

## WHAT ARE THE IMMEDIATE RISKS?

The immediate dangers of sniffing inhalants fall into two main groups:

- Accidents
- Sudden sniffing death


### Accidents

Accidents can occur if somebody is affected by inhalants. They may lose control over what they are doing and hurt themselves or other people. They may be overcome by the fumes of what they are sniffing and fall unconscious.

Many inhalant products are highly flammable and users could set fire to themselves if cigarettes are being smoked as well.

Death has occurred where people have lost consciousness and then choked on their own vomit. Some people use plastic bags to sniff inhalants. If you fall asleep, or lose consciousness with a plastic bag covering your face you might suffocate.

Users can lose consciousness especially if they are engaged in vigorous physical activity such as dancing or running. There have also been cases of fatalities when people have drunk nitrites rather than inhaling the vapours. Inhalants are often used in combination with other drugs, particularly



alcohol. The nitrites are often mixed with other party drugs like speed or ecstasy. Some people say they help boost drug effects but any combination of drugs can be dangerous and lead to unpredictable effects.

## Sudden sniffing death

There is always the risk of death from sniffing inhalants. 'Sudden sniffing death' has followed the use of any one of a number of inhalants including aerosol sprays and correction fluids. It is believed that chemicals in these products can cause heart failure, particularly if the user is stressed or does heavy exercise after inhaling. Nitrite use, in particular, has also led to heart attacks when people already have heart or blood pressure problems. However, sudden sniffing death is rare.

When inhaled by naïve users, nitrous oxide can result in unconsciousness resulting from 'hypoxia' (a condition in which tissues are starved of oxygen), due to the displacement of oxygen from the lungs of the user. One of the more popular methods of use of whipping cream dispensers is to empty several bulbs into a balloon and then inhale the contents of the balloon into the mouth. This is a very dangerous practice and can lead to the inhalation of 100% nitrous oxide. Fatalities have occurred as a result.

## ARE THERE ANY OTHER PROBLEMS?

### Sniffer's rash

People who sniff inhalants often get a reddening of the skin around the mouth and on the lips. There may be lots of small spots of pimples. This condition is known as sniffer's rash, and it is caused by repeatedly putting a plastic bag to the mouth.

### Tolerance

Like any drug, after people have been sniffing inhalants regularly they need to use more to get the same effect. They also have to sniff more often. This is called tolerance.

## ARE THERE ANY LONG-TERM DANGERS?

Most young people will never use inhalants. Of those who decide to use, most will experiment once or twice and then stop, often due to the unpleasant side effects. Others may use on a social basis while they find the substance a 'thrill', with only a very small number becoming long-term users of inhalants.

However, there are a number of problems which may occur for people who have been sniffing for a long time. Although some people experience liver and kidney damage after using inhalants most of the problems disappear once the person has stopped. The majority of people who sniff do not suffer any long-term damage, even those who have been sniffing for a long time. However, it is important to remember that there are deaths every year due to sniffing.

One of the most serious long-term effects of chroming can be damage to the eyes. Blood vessels can burst in the user's eyes making them completely red. This can eventually lead to blindness in extreme cases.

Nitrites also increase pressure on the eye ball and are dangerous for people to use if they have the eye disease, glaucoma

## WHAT ABOUT THE LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF PETROL?

There are many serious effects for long-term users of petrol. Chronic use may lead to irreversible brain damage. Lead poisoning is a major problem and can lead to liver, kidney and brain damage. The physical symptoms of lead poisoning can include:

- Weight loss
- Tremors
- Lack of coordination
- A clumsy, uncertain walk



Psychological symptoms may also include:

- Poor attention span
- Forgetfulness
- Slow response
- Insomnia
- Staring spells

There is no way to remove lead taken into the body by petrol sniffing. There are drugs which can remove lead still in the blood immediately after sniffing, but if the lead is absorbed into the brain it is impossible to remove.

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### Is brain damage an inevitable result of inhalant use?

There are reports of long-term heavy use of inhalants leading to brain damage but this is very rare. The greatest risks to users are accidents due to the disorienting effects of sniffing the products. Some young people have lost consciousness and have subsequently choked on their own vomit. Suffocation is a risk when using plastic bags. There have also been deaths from spraying the product straight down the throat. This can freeze the airways or result in heart failure.

### Do most young people who sniff inhalants end up having a long-term problem?

Most young people will never use inhalants. Of those who do decide to use, most will experiment once or twice and then stop, often due to the unpleasant side effects. Others may use on a social basis while they find the substance a 'thrill', with only a very small number becoming long-term users of inhalants. These long-term dependent users generally have other major problems in their lives.



## Why do we hear so much about chroming? Is it that great a problem?

The sniffing of chrome based paint or 'chroming' is not popular among young people. The practice seems to occur within very specific communities and much of the interest in the problem is completely media driven. Unfortunately when the media identifies a story like chroming it often highlights it and makes it appear to be a far greater problem than it really is.

Alcohol is a far more popular drug amongst young people and is a major factor in death, disease, accidents and crime in Australia. When compared to chroming, alcohol is a far greater problem in Australian society. However, due to the sensational nature of chroming, the media focuses a great deal of attention to it making it appear to be a far greater problem than it really is.

## Isn't inhalant misuse only a problem in Aboriginal communities?

A variety of inhalants are used by a wide range of young people. Many people believe that inhalant misuse is predominantly a problem in Aboriginal communities, possibly due to the media attention that petrol sniffing in isolated communities has attracted. However, it is important to realize that young people from all socio-economic and ethnic backgrounds are potential inhalant users.

## How do I know if my child is using inhalants?

Unfortunately there are no clear signs or symptoms that parents can directly link to inhalant use. There is a common link between inhalant use and problems in school - failing grades, chronic absences and general apathy, but of course these could be also associated with many other things tied to adolescent behaviour, not simply inhalant use.

Other signs could include the following:

- paint or stains on body or clothing
- spots or sores around the mouth
- red or runny eyes or nose
- chemical breath odour
- drunk, dazed or dizzy appearance
- nausea
- loss of appetite
- anxiety, excitability, irritability

Once again, it is important that parents do not jump to conclusions. Many of these 'signs' could be simply linked to common adolescent behaviour.

## WHAT TO DO WHEN SOMETHING GOES WRONG

If someone uses an inhalant and something goes wrong it is important that you seek medical help as soon as possible.

- If a plastic bag has been used to inhale the drug remove it immediately
- Call Emergency 000 for an ambulance
- Make sure that there is a lot of air by keeping crowds back and opening windows. Loosen tight clothing
- Check that the person's airway is clear. If not, remove anything from the person's mouth and extend the neck to open the airway. This will stop them from choking
- Check breathing. If the person is not breathing be prepared to immediately start mouth to mouth resuscitation
- Check circulation by feeling for a pulse in the person's neck. If there is no pulse then immediately commence heart massage

- If airway, breathing and circulation are OK, put the person in the recovery position
- Keep the person comfortably warm with blankets or a coat
- Do not give the person fluids
- Explain to the ambulance crew what has happened and what you have done. If you have the information, tell them what the person has taken and how long ago
- Do not leave the person until after professional help arrives

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