

BASIC FACTS ABOUT DRUGS: Inhalants

What are Inhalants?



Inhalants are drugs that produce a quick, temporary high; lightheadedness; and a general good feeling when their fumes or gases are breathed. It tends to last only a short time, from a few minutes to about three-quarters of an hour and may be followed by after-effects, such as drowsiness, headache, or nausea, which last for an hour or two.

Inhalants are readily available and relatively cheap. Many of them can be obtained legally, even by minors. More than a thousand common household products can be used to get high. The average age at which adolescents first try these drugs is 13.

What are the Main Types?

Organic solvents are liquid compounds of carbon that have the power to break down, or dissolve, other carbon compounds. Examples of products containing high levels of organic solvents are: gasoline, lighter fluid and butane lighter fuel, spray paint, paint thinners and removers, transparent glue, rubber-cement thinner, hair spray, nail polish remover, degreasers, and cleaning fluids.

Nitrites are compounds of nitrogen and act mainly as vasodilators, causing the walls of blood vessels to relax so that the vessels enlarge, or dilate. They are used medically to relieve attacks of angina chest pain. The most commonly abused are amyl nitrite and butyl nitrite. Amyl nitrite is usually packaged in small, crushable glass or plastic capsules, known as poppers or snappers. Butyl nitrite often comes in a bottle or spray can and is sold as an air freshener under names such as Rush and Locker Room.

Nitrous oxide, commonly called laughing gas, was the first inhalant used for recreational purposes. Introduced as an anesthetic, dentists still use this compound of nitrogen and oxygen. It doesn't completely block pain, but it does alter the perception of pain, so that there is no distress. Nitrous oxide tends to produce a pleasant, dreamy state of consciousness, somewhere between waking and sleep. Stored in metal tanks, the compressed gas is also used to make whipped cream. When packaged in small cartridges, called whippets, and enclosed in a container of cream, the gas mixes with the cream when the nozzle is depressed.

How are they taken?

The fumes from organic solvents may be inhaled from their containers. A liquid solvent may also be poured or sprayed on an absorbent material, such as a sock or rag, or a roll of toilet paper. To make the fumes stronger, abusers put the solvent in a paper or plastic bag or a rubber balloon, and then hold the open end over the mouth and nose. The capsules containing amyl nitrite are crushed and held beneath the nose. Butyl nitrite may be inhaled in its container, or, like organic solvents, applied to cloth or paper. Nitrous oxide may be inhaled through a mask from a tank of the compressed gas or

directly from a punctured whippet. The nozzle of a whipped-cream container can also be depressed in such a way that only the nitrous oxide is discharged.

Short-term effects

During the high itself and the period afterward, physical coordination and mental judgment are impaired. Abusers often suffer falls and other accidents and cannot drive safely. They may engage in irresponsible or dangerous behavior.

Inhalants irritate the breathing passages, sometimes provoking severe coughing, painful inflammation, and nosebleeds.

Nitrite inhalants often cause intense facial flushing, feelings of severe weakness and dizziness, and heart palpitations.

Inhalants, particularly in heavy doses, may not produce a pleasant high but mental confusion, hallucinations, and delusions of persecution (paranoia) instead.

Inhalants may dangerously hinder the activity of the nerves that control breathing. The resulting respiratory depression may cause unconsciousness, coma, or even death. The danger is especially great if inhalants are taken along with other nervous-system depressants, such as alcohol or barbiturates (sleeping pills).

Even first-time users run the risk of sudden sniffing death (SSD). Abusers may suffer fatal irregularity of heartbeat (arrhythmia) or complete heart arrest. The risk of SSD seems to be higher if the abuser engages in strenuous physical activity or is suddenly startled.

Long-term effects

Repeated use tends to produce increased tolerance to the drugs and larger doses are needed to achieve the same results. Heavy doses increase the risk of permanent brain damage, with effects such as poor memory, extreme mood swings, tremors, and seizures. Heavy, continuous use also increases the risk of heart arrhythmia and respiratory failure.

Nitrite inhalants tend to raise the pressure of the fluid within the eyes. The raised pressure may eventually lead to glaucoma and blindness. Regular nitrite abuse may also cause severe, pounding headaches.

Organic solvents are the most dangerous of all inhalants. They are poisons that break down organic compounds including those that make up living cells. Once absorbed into the body, they tend to concentrate in the liver and kidneys. Repeated, heavy abuse may cause fatal damage to these organs, as well as to the heart and nervous system.

What are the Signs of Abuse?

Certain signs suggest that a person may be abusing inhalants:

- A sweetish, chemical smell on the clothes or body
- Inflammation of the nostrils, frequent nosebleeds, or a rash around the nose and mouth
- Poor appetite and loss of weight
- Pale, bluish skin
- Watery, bloodshot eyes with dilated pupils
- Slow, slurred speech
- Clumsy, staggering gait, and drunken appearance