

Another Look at . . .

Inhalant Abuse or “Huffing”

Far West Family Services, your employee assistance program • 206-682-8149 • 1-800-398-3440 • 206-363-4614 fax

Under the sink . . . in the garage . . . in the craft room . . . danger is lurking. Kids as young as 12 are getting high every day, and they don't have to buy illicit drugs: all they have to do is scrounge around the house for a wide variety of inhalants as common as spray paint or canned whipped cream.

“Huffing,” “bagging,” or “dusting” are some of the many terms for intentionally breathing gas or vapors



such as paint, glue or shoe polish with the purpose of reaching a high. Inhalant abuse is highly addictive, causes damage to the brain and other organs, and can cause sudden death *even on the very first use*. Yet children all over America are falling into the trap of thinking it's cool.

More than 2 million youths, boys and girls, ages 12 to 17 have used inhalants at least once, according to the 2001 National Household Survey of Drug Use. The National

Institute on Drug Abuse states that 6% of American children have tried “huffing” by the fourth grade.

According to the Brown University Child and Adolescent Behavior Letter (May 2004), the average user is an 8th grade boy in the suburbs, but kids of all races and ages are “huffing” and “dusting” to get high. About 20% of eighth-graders report having experimented with inhalants (*International Journal of Addiction*, 1993; 28:1613-1621).

In some cases the child will inhale a substance directly from the container, for example, air freshener, compressed air (used for cleaning computers), or hair spray. Or they might soak a rag or piece of clothing in lighter fluid, gasoline, or one of many cleaning agents, and sniff the cloth to get high. Some kids spray the inhalant into a paper bag and breathe the fumes. Some paint

correction fluid on their clothing and sniff it during class.

The effect of “huffing” has been described as an “instant rush,” followed by feeling intoxicated. The initial feeling of excitement can be followed by lightheadedness, agitation and then drowsiness. They may experience blurred vision, slurred speech, and poor coordination. The child may even lose consciousness.

The physical damage is severe. Solvents (such as nail polish remover, paint thinner, even correction fluid) break down fatty tissue in the brain. The result is memory loss, personality changes, hearing loss and diminished cognitive functioning. In fact, studies have shown that the brain actually shrinks. The inhaled chemicals also destroy the myelin sheath that

Signs of inhalant abuse:

- Paint or stains on body, clothing, rags, or bags
- Unusual breath odor or chemical odor on clothing
- Slurred or disoriented speech
- Anxiety, excitability, irritability or restlessness
- Missing household items
- Red or runny eyes or nose
- Spots or sores around the mouth
- Drunk, dazed or dizzy appearance
- Nausea or loss of appetite

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protects the nerves, resulting in loss of coordination, spasms, and permanent nerve damage.

“Huffers” can also experience heart damage. Because “huffing” can



cause heart arrhythmias, Sudden Sniffing Death can occur on the very first use. The heart beats rapidly and erratically until it stops altogether. In addition, “huffers” sometimes suffocate when the fumes they are inhaling enter their lungs and they can no longer breathe.

What can we do?

Children may start “huffing” at a very early age, and because inhalants are so readily available, education and prevention are vital. Inhalants are poisons, and we must teach our children the dangers of “huffing” before they are tempted to start. It is important to start talking about the problem of inhalant abuse with very young children. Schools and parents must include accurate information about “huffing” in drug prevention programs. Explain to children that the damage done by huffing is permanent. *Tell them their first experiment could kill them.*

Help your child learn to say no. Do some role-playing. Give your child permission to blame it on you. He or she can say, “My parents would kill me. I’ve gotta go.”

If someone you know is “huffing” it is imperative to seek treatment from a mental health counselor with specific training about substance abuse. “Huffing” is extremely addictive, and withdrawal symptoms can last for weeks. Sometimes it will be necessary to hospitalize the child for long-term treatment. A caring mental health professional can guide you through the process.

Additional Resources:

National Inhalant Prevention Coalition

www.inhalants.org
800-269-4237

Partnership for a Drug-Free America™

www.drugfree.org

Commonly abused inhalants

Solvents: paint thinner, nail polish remover, correction fluid, toxic magic markers, cigar lighter fluid, gasoline, air conditioning coolant (Freon)

Adhesives: model airplane glue, rubber cement, PVC cement

Aerosols: spray paint, hairspray, deodorant, fabric protectors, computer cleaning sprays

Cleaning Agents: dry cleaning fluid, spot removers, degreaser

Food products: vegetable cooking spray, whipped cream (in spray can)

Gases: nitrous oxide sometimes sold in small sealed vials called “Whippets,” Butyl nitrite and amyl nitrite sold in sealed vials called “poppers”

