

HEALTHY MINDS
A WEEKLY COLUMN ALL ABOUT MENTAL WELLNESS
Elliott B. Sewell, MAE, LPCC, NCC

Inhalant Abuse



Children are curious; teens are curious and also rebellious because they are in the process of becoming their own persons. They experiment with beer and alcoholic beverages, with pot, with addictive illicit substances, and with prescription drugs. There is another class of common household items that can be inhaled and cause mind-altering effects. These are called inhalants and include household cleaners, nail polish remover, glue, gasoline, and nitrous oxide (laughing gas) found in whip cream makers. There are also fluorinated hydrocarbons found in spray cans such as hairspray, paint, and spray cleaners.

There are three categories of inhalants: gases, nitrites, and solvents.

Gases include: aerosol propellants like those found in spray paint, hair spray, spray deodorant, and fabric protector spray; some commercial or household substances such as propane tanks, butane lighters, refrigerant gases, and whip cream dispensers, and; medical anesthetic gases such as ether, chloroform, halothane, and nitrous oxide.

Solvents include: household products, such as nail polish remover, paint thinner, degreaser, gasoline, dry-cleaning fluid, and glue, and; office supplies such as correction fluid, felt-tip markers, and electric contact cleaner.

Nitrites include: cyclohexyl nitrite (found in room deodorizers); amyl nitrite (used in medicine), and; butyl nitrite, formerly used in anti-freeze and perfumes.

Recent surveys reported by the National Institute of Drug Abuse (NIDA) stated that there were about 40 deaths per year from inhalant abuse; that in a 2004 survey, over 17% of eighth-graders, about 12% of tenth- and twelfth-graders had used inhalants at least once in their lives.

We don't think that these common products, found in the home and supermarkets, can be abused drugs, but they are easily available and can be toxic. They are easily absorbed into the bloodstream through the lungs and are quickly transported to the brain and the rest of the body, making the user feel high in a few minutes. The effects are comparable to alcohol, making the user dizzy and lightheaded, slurring speech, losing coordination, and experiencing euphoria, and sometimes hallucinations and delusions. Repeatedly inhaling makes the user feel less inhibited, less in control, drowsy, and can leave the user with a long-lasting headache.

Some inhalants contain several chemicals; some can quickly pass through the body and others are absorbed into the nervous system, including the brain, damaging the protective

cover surrounding the nervous system (the myelin) and can damage nerve fibers giving effects similar to MS, or produce muscle spasms and tremors or even PERMANENT problems in walking and talking, making the user appear clumsy and/or slow. It can also affect the memory, the ability to learn new things, or even to carry on a conversation.

Chronic use of inhalants can seriously and permanently harm the heart, the kidney, the liver, and the muscles, and permanently damage the brain and spinal chord. Some inhalants can seriously impair the ability of the bone marrow to produce blood cells and impair vision. Users may suffer from depression, irritability, disorientation, or inattentiveness.

Let's look at some of the effects of specific inhalants. Toluene (in nail polish, glue, spray paint and de-waxer can cause hearing loss, liver and kidney damage, and damage to the brain and nervous system. Trichloroethylene, found in cleaning fluid and correction liquid can cause hearing loss, and liver and kidney damage. Hexane in glue or gasoline and nitrous oxide in whipped cream makers can cause blackouts and limb spasms. Benzene in gasoline can cause bone marrow damage. Butane in cigarette lighters weaken the heart and can cause the heart to speed up its rate, lose its rhythm, and occasionally, to stop working, causing death. Nitrites enlarge blood vessels and are often used to increase sexual pleasure, leading to the increased risk of unsafe sex and the diseases that are associated with this practice.

Use of inhalants can kill the user in several ways. Prolonged sniffing of solvents, butane, propane or aerosol sprays can overwork and deregulate the heart until "sudden sniffing death" occurs. Some users have passed out, thrown up, and choked on their own vomit. Others have suffered from accidents, including car wrecks, because of their inability to drive under the influence.

Parents: Be aware of this problem and be alert. Explain gently to your children how dangerous these substances can be. Even using a substance once can injure or kill a sensitive person.

TIP OF THE WEEK: For those of you on a diet, a recent study shows you how to increase your weight loss. It is simple and requires some simple record-keeping. It has been found that simply keeping a record of EVERYTHING that you eat and the approximate calories; this will help you stay on top of your diet and more weight reduction will be the result.