

# Drug Facts: **INHALANTS**

A Library and Resource Center on Alcohol, Tobacco, Other Drugs, Mental Health and Wellness



Inhalants are common products found right in the home and are among the most popular and deadly substances kids abuse. Inhalant abuse can result in death from the very first use. About one in five kids report having used inhalants by the eighth grade. They sniff or "huff" ordinary household products like nail polish remover, cleaning fluid, gasoline, and spray paint.

Inhalants are breathable chemical vapors that produce psychoactive (mind-altering) effects. Although people are exposed to volatile solvents and other inhalants in the home and in the workplace, many do not think of "inhalable" substances as drugs because most of them were never meant to be used in that way.

Young people are likely to abuse inhalants, in part, because inhalants are readily available and inexpensive. Parents should see that these substances are monitored closely so that children do not abuse them.

## **Inhalants fall into the following categories:**

### **Solvents**

- industrial or household solvents or solvent-containing products, including paint thinners or solvents, degreasers (dry-cleaning fluids), gasoline, and glues
- art or office supply solvents, including correction fluids, felt-tip marker fluid, and electronic contact cleaners

### **Gases**

- gases used in household or commercial products, including butane lighters and propane tanks, whipping cream aerosols or dispensers (whippets), and refrigerant gases
- household aerosol propellants and associated solvents in items such as spray paints, hair or deodorant sprays, and fabric protector sprays
- medical anesthetic gases, such as ether, chloroform, halothane, and nitrous oxide (laughing gas)

### **Nitrites**

- aliphatic nitrites, including cyclohexyl nitrite, which is available to the general public; amyl nitrite, which is available only by prescription; and butyl nitrite, which is now an illegal substance

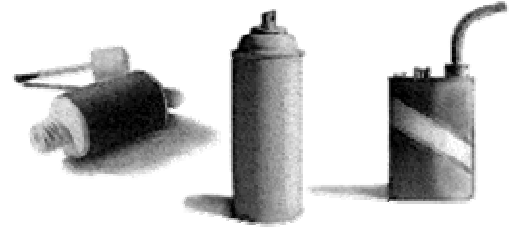
## **HEALTH HAZARDS**

**Physical effects.** Nearly all abused inhalants produce effects similar to anesthetics, which act to slow down the body's functions. When inhaled in sufficient concentrations, inhalants can cause intoxicating effects that can last only a few minutes or several hours if inhalants are taken repeatedly. Initially, users

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may feel slightly stimulated; with successive inhalations, they may feel less inhibited and less in control; finally, a user can lose consciousness.

**Irreversible hazards.** Sniffing highly concentrated amounts of the chemicals in solvents or aerosol sprays can directly induce heart failure and death. This is especially common from the abuse of fluorocarbons and butane-type gases. High concentrations of inhalants also cause death from suffocation by displacing oxygen in the lungs and then in the central nervous system so that breathing ceases.



**Other irreversible effects caused by inhaling specific solvents are:**

- Hearing loss - toluene (paint sprays, glues, dewaxers) and trichloroethylene (cleaning fluids, correction fluids)
- Peripheral neuropathies or limb spasms - hexane (glues, gasoline) and nitrous oxide (whipping cream, gas cylinders)
- Central nervous system or brain damage - toluene (paint sprays, glues, dewaxers)
- Bone marrow damage - benzene (gasoline)
- Liver and kidney damage - toluene- containing substances and chlorinated hydrocarbons (correction fluids, dry- cleaning fluids)
- Blood oxygen depletion - organic nitrites ("poppers," "bold," and "rush") and methylene chloride (varnish removers, paint thinners)

*Information provided by the National Institute on Drug Abuse  
www.theantidrug.com*