



Facts About Petrol, paints and other inhalants

What are inhalants?

Inhalants are substances such as petrol, paint and glue that give off fumes at room temperature. The fumes are sniffed and are quickly absorbed into the lungs and bloodstream to give the user an immediate 'high'. Some common uses of other inhalants include sniffing fumes from:

- ⊙ air fresheners
- ⊙ hair spray
- ⊙ deodorants
- ⊙ fly spray
- ⊙ varnish
- ⊙ cleaning fluids
- ⊙ lighter fluids
- ⊙ poppers (amyl nitrate)
- ⊙ soda bulbs (nitrous oxide).

How do people use it?

Inhalants can be sniffed directly into the mouth or nose from a container, from a plastic bag or through a cloth.

What are the immediate effects from sniffing inhalants?

Sniffing inhalants mostly has a depressant effect on the brain. This means the brain, the heart and the breathing all slow down. There are some inhalants that have a stimulant effect (eg poppers).

The immediate effects of sniffing petrol, paints and other inhalants may include:

- ⊙ a feeling of wellbeing
- ⊙ tiredness (fatigue)
- ⊙ headache
- ⊙ blurred vision
- ⊙ slurred speech
- ⊙ drowsiness
- ⊙ feeling sick in the stomach and vomiting
- ⊙ doing things without thinking (taking risks)
- ⊙ feeling jumpy or angry
- ⊙ seeing things that are not really there – (hallucinations)
- ⊙ not being able to move properly
- ⊙ stomach pain
- ⊙ irregular heart beat
- ⊙ memory loss/not being able to concentrate
- ⊙ loss of consciousness
- ⊙ death.

There is no so safe level of inhalant use.

Sudden sniffing death

Exercise, stress or fear can be dangerous to a person who has been sniffing because it puts extra pressure on their heart and can cause the heart to stop beating. This is called Sudden sniffing death. For this reason it is important not to chase or frighten someone who is using inhalants.

Suffocation

People who use inhalants can die as a result of not being able to breathe (suffocation). The oxygen in the lungs is forced out by the poisonous fumes which may stop the user from getting enough oxygen. Inhaling fumes from a bag or in a confined space (such as under a blanket) increases the risk of death from suffocation.

How to help if someone is passed out after sniffing:

- ⊙ lay them on their side so they don't choke if they vomit
- ⊙ make sure they can breathe plenty of air
- ⊙ take away anything they have been sniffing
- ⊙ Call for help, Dial 000 for an ambulance.

What are the long term effects from sniffing inhalants?

Regular long term use of inhalants can lead to serious health problems including:

- ⊙ brain damage
- ⊙ not being able to move the body properly
- ⊙ memory loss – not able to remember stories
- ⊙ liver damage
- ⊙ kidney damage
- ⊙ heart damage
- ⊙ weight loss
- ⊙ muscle weakness
- ⊙ paranoia, hostility and depression
- ⊙ learning difficulties.

Some of these problems may go away if the person stops sniffing. Sometimes damage can be forever. It may take a long time for the person to get better.



Pregnant women

It is very important that women who are pregnant do not sniff because this can harm them and their babies. The chemicals from sniffing can be passed from the mum into the unborn baby causing the baby to be born early, to be born sick and/or to have breathing problems.

Dependence

Dependence can be psychological (in the head) and physical (the body has cravings). Dependence on inhalants is rare but it does occur, particularly among those people who use regularly.

Giving up inhalants (withdrawal)

People who give up sniffing may experience some withdrawal symptoms. Withdrawal symptoms are fairly mild (compared to the withdrawal symptoms people experience when they give up other substances such as alcohol, heroin or tobacco). Withdrawal symptoms usually start one or two days after stopping use and can last up to five days.

Withdrawal symptoms may include:

- ⊙ food cravings
- ⊙ anxiety
- ⊙ irritability
- ⊙ headache
- ⊙ nausea
- ⊙ muscle cramps
- ⊙ tiredness/fatigue
- ⊙ trouble sleeping (insomnia)
- ⊙ seeing things that aren't there (hallucinations)
- ⊙ shaking (tremors).

If you want help and support or are worried about someone's inhalant use call the Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS) in your state. See also the Knowledge Centre listing for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs.

References

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