

Inhalants

Inhalants, also known as solvents, are substances that some people sniff for their mood-altering effects. Almost any solvent can be inhaled: cooking spray, gasoline, kerosene, lighter fluid, typewriter correction fluid, antifreeze, paints, model airplane glue, cleaning fluids, and nail polish remover. They all evaporate easily, giving off chemical fumes.

To use inhalants, some people squeeze glue into a bag and breathe in the vapour. Others pour solvents onto a cloth and hold it over their faces. They can also sniff directly from a container or gas tank.

Sometimes you can tell solvent users by their smell and appearance. They may have an unpleasant odour on their breath and clothes, and increased saliva (drooling and spitting). They may have glue on their hands and clothes, facial rashes, chronic nosebleeds, nose and mouth sores, throat or ear infections, poor appetites, and low energy.

Using inhalants, or selling them to abusers, is illegal in Alberta.

Effects of short-term use

- Solvents are inhaled through the lungs and into the bloodstream. The effects are felt very quickly and users soon look and feel as if they are drunk.

A brief “high” is followed by a period of drowsiness that can last for one to two hours. Experienced users can remain intoxicated for longer by inhaling periodically to maintain the high.

- With increasing doses, inhalant users may
 - lose inhibitions
 - feel exhilarated (“high”)
 - get clumsy and slur their words
 - have trouble making sensible decisions
 - get sleepy and slow-moving
 - experience ringing in the ears, dizziness, and blurred vision
 - become nervous, upset, and disoriented
 - have headaches and chest and stomach pains
 - feel nauseous and throw up
 - have weak muscles and difficulty speaking
 - behave disruptively or hallucinate (imagine things that aren’t there)
 - have psychotic-like reactions to inhaling (e.g., injure themselves because they think they can fly or stop a train.)

- become aggressive and violent
- permanently harm their liver, kidneys, eyes, bone marrow, heart, and blood vessels.
- Solvents catch fire easily, so users risk burns. Users sometimes pass out with their head in a plastic bag, and suffocate.
- “Sudden sniffing death” can occur due to heart failure resulting from a severely irregular heartbeat caused by sniffing.
- Because solvents are depressants, using them with other depressant drugs like alcohol or sleeping pills can be very harmful, and even fatal.

Effects of long-term use

- People who use inhalants regularly for a long time can have permanent health problems. These include memory loss, brain damage, personality changes, muscular weakness, fatigue, and nerve damage starting in the hands and feet.
- People who use drugs often can develop serious personal problems. Using drugs can become more important than family and friends. They may continue using even when job or schoolwork suffers, or when they run into financial, spiritual, or legal problems.
- Young people who use drugs heavily may not learn how to solve problems, manage emotions and become mature, responsible adults.
- Children born to inhalant abusing mothers may have growth and development problems.

Inhalants and addiction

Tolerance to inhalants develops with regular use. People who use inhalants often may find that they need more and more to get the same “high.” Taking larger doses can lead to even more of the harmful health problems.

Heavy users can become mentally and physically dependent, or addicted to how inhalants make them feel. When they stop inhaling, they experience withdrawal symptoms like being irritable, restless, depressed, slow, and tired. They can get aggressive, or experience chills, headaches, and hallucinations.

For people who have used solvents for a long time, withdrawal can be difficult. It is best to stop under supervised care.

For more information and to find an addiction services office near you, please call the 24-hour Helpline at 1-866-332-2322.