

What are inhalants?

Inhalants are chemical vapors that produce mind-altering effects when users inhale them by sniffing or snorting. These chemical vapors are found in more than 1,000 household products and typically belong to several broad categories: volatile solvents (paint thinner, gasoline, correction fluid, glue), aerosols (paint, deodorant, hair spray), gases (ether, chloroform, nitrous oxide), and nitrites (cyclohexyl nitrite, amyl nitrite, and butyl nitrite).

How are they abused?

Individuals may inhale chemical vapors directly from open containers or from rags that have been soaked in a chemical substance then held to the face or stuffed in the mouth. Abuse of inhalants is commonly referred to as “huffing.” Other methods include spraying aerosols directly into the nose or mouth or pouring inhalants onto the user’s collar, sleeves, or cuffs and sniffing them over a period of time. Fumes also may be inhaled from substances sprayed or deposited inside a paper or plastic bag—a process known as bagging. Users also inhale from balloons filled with nitrous oxide or other devices, commonly referred to as snappers and poppers, in which inhalants are sold.

Who abuses inhalants?

Individuals of all ages use inhalants, but teenagers and young adults

account for a large portion of the inhalant abuse in the United States.

Data reported in the National Household Survey on Drug Abuse indicate that an estimated 1.9 million U.S. residents aged 12 and older used inhalants at least once in the past year. The survey further revealed that 833,000 individuals aged 12 to 17 and 729,000 individuals aged 18 to 25 used inhalants in the past year.

Inhalant abuse among high school students is a particular concern. Nearly 12 percent of high school seniors in the United States used an inhalant at least once in their lifetime, and nearly 5 percent used an inhalant in the past year, according to the University of Michigan’s Monitoring the Future Survey.

What are the risks?

Side effects associated with the abuse of inhalants include dizziness, strong hallucinations, delusions, belligerence, apathy, and impaired judgment.

Long-term abusers experience additional problems including weight loss, muscle weakness, disorientation, inattentiveness, lack of coordination, irritability, and depression. Individuals who cease abuse of inhalants often endure withdrawal symptoms such as sweating, rapid pulse, hand tremors, insomnia, nausea or vomiting, hallucinations, and grand mal seizures.

Chronic inhalant abuse may cause serious and sometimes irreversible damage to the user’s heart, liver, kidneys, lungs, and brain. Brain damage may result in personality changes, diminished cognitive functioning, memory impairment, and slurred speech.

Death can occur after a single use of inhalants or after prolonged use. Sudden sniffing death (SSD) may result within minutes of inhalant abuse from irregular heart rhythm leading to heart failure.

Products Used as Inhalants

Volatile Solvents	Aerosols	Gases	Nitrites
Paint thinner	Paint	Nitrous oxide	Cyclohexyl nitrite (found in room deodorizers)
Correction fluid	Deodorant	Ether	Amyl nitrite (sold in small capsules)
Gasoline	Hair products	Chloroform	Butyl nitrite (sold in small bottles)
Felt-tip markers	Cooking products		
Nail polish and remover	Fabric protector		
Rubber cement			