

# Inhalants: Facts For Parents, Educators, And Caring Adults



## What Are Inhalants?

Although other substances that are misused can be inhaled, the term *inhalants* refers to various substances that people typically take *only* by inhaling. These substances include:

- Solvents (liquids that become gas at room temperature)
- Aerosol sprays
- Gases
- Nitrites (prescription medicines for chest pain)

Inhalants are easily bought in stores and found in the home or workplace—such as spray paints, markers, glues, and cleaning fluids. They contain dangerous substances that have psychoactive (mind-altering) properties when inhaled. People don't typically think of these products as drugs because they're not intended for getting high, but some individuals use them for that purpose. Inhalants are mostly used by young kids and teens and are the only class of substance used more by younger than by older teens.

## How Do People Use Inhalants?

People who use inhalants breathe in the fumes through their nose or mouth, usually by sniffing, snorting, bagging, or huffing. It's called different names depending on the substance and equipment they use. Although the high that inhalants produce usually lasts just a few minutes, individuals often try to make it last by continuing to inhale again and again over several hours.

## How Do Inhalants Affect The Brain?

Most inhalants affect the central nervous system and slow down brain activity. Short-term effects are similar to alcohol and include:

- Slurred or distorted speech
- Lack of coordination
- Euphoria (feeling high)
- Dizziness

- Inhalants are substances that people typically take only by inhaling (e.g., solvents, aerosol sprays, gases, and nitrites).
- Inhalants are various products easily bought and found in the home or workplace—such as spray paints, markers, glues, and cleaning fluids. They contain dangerous substances that have psychoactive (mind-altering) properties when inhaled.
- Inhalant misuse has both short and long-term health effects, including brain damage and death.
- A person can become addicted to inhalants. Behavioral health treatment can help an individual recover from addiction.

People may also feel light-headed or have hallucinations (images/sensations that seem real but aren't) or delusions (false beliefs). With repeated inhalations, many individuals feel less self-conscious and less in control. Some may start vomiting, feel drowsy for several hours, or have a headache that lasts a while.

Unlike other types of inhalants, nitrites, which are often prescribed to treat chest pain, are misused in order to improve sexual pleasure by expanding and relaxing blood vessels.



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

## What Are The Other Health Effects Of Inhalants?

Long-term effects of inhalant use may include:

- Liver and kidney damage
- Hearing loss
- Bone marrow damage
- Loss of coordination and limb spasms (from nerve damage)
- Delayed behavioral development (from brain problems)
- Brain damage (from cut-off oxygen flow to the brain)

In addition, because nitrites are misused for sexual pleasure and performance, they can lead to unsafe sexual practices or other risky behavior. This increases the chance of getting or spreading infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDS or hepatitis.

## Can A Person Overdose On Inhalants?

Yes, a person can overdose on inhalants. An overdose occurs when an individual uses too much of a drug and has a toxic reaction that results in serious, harmful symptoms or death. These symptoms can cause seizures and coma. They can even be deadly. Many solvents and aerosol sprays are highly concentrated, meaning they contain a large amount of chemicals with a lot of active ingredients. Sniffing these products can cause the heart to stop within minutes. This condition, known as sudden sniffing death, can happen to otherwise healthy young people the first time they use an inhalant. Using inhalants with a paper or plastic bag or in a closed area may cause death from suffocation (being unable to breathe).

Inhalant overdose can be treated. Because inhalant overdose can lead to seizures or cause the heart to stop, first responders and emergency room doctors try to treat the overdose by treating these conditions. They will try to stop the seizure or restart the heart.

## Can A Person Develop An Addiction To Inhalants?

Although it's not very common, repeated use of inhalants can lead to addiction, a form of substance use disorder (SUD). An SUD develops when continued use of the drug causes issues, such as health problems and failure to meet responsibilities at work, school, or home. An SUD can range from mild to severe, the most severe form being addiction.

Those who try to quit inhalants may have withdrawal symptoms that include:

- Nausea
- Loss of appetite
- Sweating
- Problems sleeping
- Mood changes

## How Can People Get Treatment For Addiction To Inhalants?

Some people seeking treatment for use of inhalants have found behavioral therapy to be helpful:

- Cognitive-behavioral therapy helps patients recognize, avoid, and cope with the situations in which they are most likely to use drugs.
- Motivational incentives use vouchers or small cash rewards for positive behaviors such as staying drug-free.

## Connecticut Resources

CT Department of Mental  
Health and Addiction Services

[www.ct.gov/DMHAS](http://www.ct.gov/DMHAS)

24/7 Access Line

1.800.563.4086

## National Resources

Substance Abuse and Mental  
Health Services Administration

[www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov)

National Institute on Drug  
Abuse (NIDA)

[www.drugabuse.gov](http://www.drugabuse.gov)

NIDA for Teens

[www.teens.drugabuse.gov](http://www.teens.drugabuse.gov)



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