Inhalant Abuse: Nothing to Sniff At

What are inhalants? Inhalants are substances whose chemical vapors can be intentionally inhaled to produce a psychoactive effect. Inhalants are generally classified into four different groups: 1) volatile solvents, such as glue, paint thinner, gasoline, and nail polish remover; 2) aerosols, including spray paint, cooking spray, and hair spray; 3) gases, including nitrous oxide and ether; and 4) nitrites, such as amyl, butyl, and isobutyl nitrites.

What are the street names for inhalants? Common street terms for inhalants are air blast, discorama, hippie crack, medusa, moon gas, oz, and poor man’s pot. Nitrites are known as rush, bolt, climax, boppers, poppers, and snappers. Nitrous oxide is referred to as buzz bomb, laughing gas, shoot the breeze, and whippets. Sniffing, huffing, bagging, and glading are terms used to describe inhalant use.

How are inhalants used? Abusers may inhale chemical vapors directly from open containers, huff fumes from chemical soaked rags, or inhale fumes from substances sprayed or placed inside plastic or paper bags, soda cans, or balloons.

What are the effects of inhalant use? The instant, short-lived high produces euphoria, disinhibition, impaired judgment, slurred speech, lethargy, nervous system depression, and sometimes unconsciousness. Prolonged use may result in neurological impairment and damage to the heart, lungs, kidneys, and liver. Sudden death, typically caused by heart failure, can occur after a single session of inhalant use. Inhalant use can also cause death by asphyxiation, suffocation, choking, or fatal injuries from accidents while intoxicated.

Who uses inhalants? Inhalants are readily available, inexpensive, and usually legal to purchase or possess, causing them to be a popular substance of abuse among youths. According to the 2002 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 4.4% of youths age 12-17 used inhalants in the past year, compared to 0.5% of adults. Inhalant users may have a drunk or disoriented appearance, slurred speech, lack of coordination, chemical odors on their breath or clothing, and paint or other stains on their face, hands, or clothes.

Are inhalants addictive? Inhalant users may build up a tolerance that requires the consumption of higher dosages to achieve similar effects. Cravings for inhalants may also develop through heavy use and withdrawal symptoms may include sweating, rapid pulse, tremors, insomnia, nausea, and hallucinations.

Are inhalants legal? While many inhalants are legal to purchase for their intended use, many states have legislation that places restrictions on the purchase, use, and/or possession of these products by minors.

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