

Inhalants

Patient Education Module

Dangers & Effects

Inhaled chemicals are rapidly absorbed through the lungs into the bloodstream and quickly distributed to the brain and other organs. Inhalants can be abused in a number of different ways. For example, aerosols can be sprayed directly into the nose or mouth and nitrous oxide can be inhaled directly from balloons. Several terms are used for the way inhalants are breathed into the lungs, including:

Sniffing or snorting: fumes are inhaled from a container.

Bagging: fumes are inhaled from substances sprayed or deposited inside a plastic bag.

Huffing: a soaked rag is placed in the mouth or held to the face for inhalation.

Within minutes, the user experiences intoxication, with symptoms similar to those produced by drinking alcohol. With Inhalants, however, intoxication lasts only a few minutes, so some users prolong the “high” by continuing to inhale repeatedly. The Inhalant user will initially feel slightly stimulated and, after successive inhalations, will feel less inhibited and less in control. Hallucinations may occur and the user can lose consciousness. Worse, he or she, may even *die*.

Short-term effects of Inhaling include:

headaches	tingling of hands and feet	lack of coordination
muscle weakness	nausea	apathy
abdominal pain	hearing loss	impaired judgment
severe mood swings	depressed reflexes	dizziness
violent behavior	stupor	numbness
belligerence	loss of consciousness	visual disturbances
slurred speech	limb spasms	fatigue

Long-term Inhalant users generally suffer from:

Weight loss, muscle weakness, disorientation, inattentiveness, lack of coordination, irritability, and depression. Different Inhalants produce different harmful effects, and regular abuse of these substances can result in serious harm to vital organs.

Serious, but potentially reversible, effects include liver and kidney damage.

Harmful *irreversible* effects include: hearing loss, limb spasms, bone marrow, central nervous system (including brain) damage, and death.

Sudden Sniffing Death Syndrome:

Users can die the first time, or any time, they try an Inhalant. This is known as Sudden Sniffing Death Syndrome. While it can occur with many types of Inhalants, it is particularly associated with the abuse of air conditioning coolant, butane, propane, electronics and the chemicals in some aerosol products. Sudden Sniffing Death Syndrome is usually associated with cardiac arrest. The Inhalant causes the heart to beat rapidly and erratically, resulting in cardiac arrest.

In addition to sudden sniffing death syndrome, there are a number of other ways that an inhalant user can die. Some of the most common are: suffocation when a plastic bag covers the face; when an individual chokes on his or her own vomit; from lack of oxygen due to vapors displacing oxygen; from lack of oxygen due to saturation of lung tissue with solvent products; from the explosion or combustion of volatile fumes; from cardiac arrest; from swallowing small plastic bags; from allergies to products; and from accidents or other causes when individuals are under the influence or unconscious.

Inhalant and Solvent Use During Pregnancy

The use of inhalants and solvents during pregnancy can have devastating effects on both the mother and the developing fetus. During pregnancy, if a woman uses inhalants or solvents she can experience: damage to the kidneys, hypertension, irregular heartbeat, nausea, loss of appetite, and an increased risk of miscarriage. Additionally, the developing fetus can also suffer from: kidney problems, low birth weight, and a smaller than normal head size. Babies exposed to inhalants or solvents while in the uterus may also experience alcohol-like withdrawal symptoms including: high-pitched cry, crying for long periods of time, tremors, floppy muscle tone, difficulty with feeding, and poor sleeping.