

# INHALANTS: THE FACTS

## WHAT ARE INHALANTS?

Inhalants and solvents are sometimes referred to as volatile substances. They include a wide variety of easily obtained products and substances that can be misused by either sniffing or inhaling the vapours. Breathing in these fumes may produce euphoric feelings or a 'high'. Inhalants are central nervous system (CNS) depressants. This means they slow down the workings of the brain, particularly breathing and heart.

When inhaled, the fumes enter the bloodstream very quickly and the effects are felt after just a few seconds. Their effects mimic alcohol (another depressant) but the effect is much quicker because the chemicals are sent straight to the blood through the lungs. A headache usually follows.

Alternative names for Inhalants: Huffing, Sniffing, Inhaling, Chroming, Bagging, Glue, Gas, Poppers, Snappers, Rush.

## FORMS OF INHALANTS

- Volatile solvents are liquids or semi-solids. They are usually common household and industrial products (glue, paint, dry cleaning fluids etc).
- Aerosols are sprays that contain propellants and solvents.
- Fuels (petrol, cigarette lighter gas etc).
- Gases include medical anaesthetics, including nitrous oxide, and gases used in household or commercial products (fire extinguishers).
- Nitrites such as amyl, butyl and isobutyl nitrite (together known as alkyl nitrites, or poppers or snappers due to the containers they come in).

The drug is inhaled through the nose or mouth.

Some drugs are also inhaled directly from the container. Sometimes they are sprayed directly into the mouth or nose. This method is very dangerous because it can cause suffocation.

It can also cause skin and mucous membrane damage from the freezing effects of inhalants such as aerosols – effectively frostbite.

## EFFECTS OF INHALANTS

The effects of inhalants depends on:

- how much you use and what it is
- your height and weight
- your general health
- whether you use an inhalant on its own or with other drugs.

### IMMEDIATE EFFECTS

The effects of inhalants may start to be felt immediately and can last from 2 – 3 minutes up to 45 minutes.

### Physical Effects may include:

- initial "rush" or "high"
- giggling and laughing
- drowsiness
- headaches
- bloodshot or glazed eyes
- blurred vision
- nosebleeds
- runny nose or rhinorrhea
- sneezing
- unpleasant breath
- slurred speech
- irregular heart beat
- chest pain
- nausea and vomiting
- diarrhoea
- low blood pressure (particularly from amyl nitrite)
- impaired/decreased coordination and muscle control (ataxia)
- Irregular or rapid heart beat.
- impaired capacity as a parent/primary carer of children
- blackout, convulsions, coma.

### Psychological effects may include:

- feeling of wellbeing
- lowered inhibitions / increased confidence which can lead to risky behaviour
- excitement, euphoria
- agitation, uneasiness and aggression
- paranoia
- hallucinations and delusions
- confusion and disorientation
- impaired judgement
- loss of inhibition
- feeling disoriented
- visual distortions.

### SUDDEN SNIFFING DEATH

"Sudden sniffing death" (SSD) has followed the use of aerosol inhalants. It is believed that chemicals in these inhalants can cause the heart to stop, particularly if the user is stressed, startled or does heavy exercise after inhaling. This is rare.

### COMING DOWN

As the effects of inhalants begin to wear off, a person may experience effects such as headaches, nausea and dizziness. These effects can last for a number of days.

### LONG-TERM EFFECTS

If you use inhalants long-term you may experience the following effects:

- pimples, rashes or blisters around the mouth and lips
- tremors
- weight loss
- tiredness
- excessive thirst
- loss of sense of smell and hearing
- problems with blood production, which may result in problems such as anaemia, irregular heartbeat and damage to the heart muscle
- forgetfulness and memory impairment
- brain damage
- reduced attention and ability to think clearly and logically
- liver and kidney damage
- irritability, hostility, feeling depressed or feeling persecuted
- chest pain or angina
- indigestion
- stomach ulcers.

Some inhalants such as cleaning products, correction fluid, aerosol sprays and petrol can cause permanent damage, especially if people use them heavily for a long period. Some of the chemicals in inhalants may build up in the body. They can irritate the stomach and the intestines, and can cause damage to the brain, central nervous system, kidneys and liver.

## MIXING WITH OTHER DRUGS

The chances of an overdose are increased if inhalants are taken with other depressant drugs such as alcohol, benzodiazepines or opiates. Using inhalants with other depressants can affect breathing rate and the heart and blood vessels. Mixing drugs can also increase the risk of passing out and suffocating or choking on vomit.

## INHALANTS RELATED EMERGENCY

If you can't wake someone up or you are concerned that they may have sustained a head injury from a drug related fall – call an ambulance immediately – dial **Triple Zero (000)**.

If the person has been mixing inhalants with other drugs, tell the NSW Ambulance paramedic exactly what they have taken. Paramedics are there to help. Generally paramedics don't involve the police **unless** there is danger to themselves or other people/children, someone dies, or a crime (such as violence or theft) has been committed.

# TOLERANCE AND DEPENDENCE

People who use inhalants regularly can develop dependence and tolerance to them, which means they need to take larger amounts of inhalants to get the same effect.

Evidence suggests that long-term use of inhalants can lead to a psychological dependence. People who are dependent on inhalants find that using the drug becomes far more important than other activities in their life. They crave the drug and find it very difficult to stop using it. People may find they feel an urge to use them when they are in specific surroundings or socialising with friends.

## THE LAW

In Australia it is illegal to sell, supply or inhale products containing any of the five following nitrites: amyl, iso-amyl, alkyl, butyl and octyl – unless it is under specifically approved circumstances such as a prescription from a medical practitioner, pharmacist supply or distribution by a licence holder.

## INFORMATION AND ADVICE

For free and confidential advice about alcohol and other drugs 24 hours, 7 days a week, call the **National Alcohol and Other Drug hotline: 1800 250 015**.

It will automatically direct you to the Alcohol and Drug Information Service in the state or territory you are calling from.

**Your room** provides drug and alcohol information and advice, campaigns and resources. Visit [www.yourroom.com.au](http://www.yourroom.com.au)

**Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council** provides links to Aboriginal community controlled health services across NSW. Visit [www.ahmrc.org.au](http://www.ahmrc.org.au) for information about AHMRC members including a regional map, information and links to members websites.

**Drug and Alcohol Multicultural Education Centre (DAMEC)** provides services for people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities. Contact DAMEC on (02) 8113 1301 or for counselling and support services for CALD communities call (02) 8706 0150.

**Drug Info** provides facts and resources on alcohol and other drugs and the prevention of related harm. Visit [www.druginfo.adf.org.au](http://www.druginfo.adf.org.au)

**State Library of New South Wales Drug Info** provides up to date information on alcohol and other drugs in public libraries throughout NSW. Visit [www.druginfo.sl.nsw.gov.au](http://www.druginfo.sl.nsw.gov.au)

**eheadspace** provides mental health and wellbeing support, information and services for young people (12 - 25 years) and their family and friends. Visit [www.eheadspace.org.au](http://www.eheadspace.org.au)

**Family Drug Support** provides 24-7 telephone support to families in crisis due to drug and alcohol issues. Call the Helpline on 1300 368 186 or visit [www.fds.org.au](http://www.fds.org.au)

**Kids Helpline** is a free, 24 hour counselling service for young people aged 5 to 25 years. Counselling is offered via the Kids Helpline website [www.kidshelp.com.au](http://www.kidshelp.com.au) or email, or call 1800 55 1800.

**Nepean Youth Drug and Alcohol Service (NYDAS)** works within a holistic model of care to address a range of issues for young people (12 - 20 years of age) related to their alcohol and other drug use. Call (02) 4734 2129 or (02) 4734 1333.

**NSW Users and AIDS Association (NUAA)** is a peak drug user organisation in NSW providing harm reduction information and blood borne virus prevention peer education. Visit [www.nuaa.org.au](http://www.nuaa.org.au)

**Poisons Information Centre** is a 24/7 call centre service available across Australia. Call 13 11 26.

**ReachOut** is an Australian online youth mental health service with a mobile-friendly site and forums where you can access help, information and support. Visit [au.reachout.com](http://au.reachout.com)

# WITHDRAWAL

Symptoms of withdrawal include:

- anxiety
- depression
- loss of appetite
- irritation
- aggression

- dizziness
- tremors
- nausea

If you are experiencing problems with withdrawal, contact your doctor or health centre.

## DRIVING UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF INHALANTS

It is not safe to drive while using any drug including inhalants, given their effects on vision and coordination. Anyone under the influence of inhalants who kills or injures another person while driving can be sentenced to a term in prison.

## PREGNANCY AND BREASTFEEDING

Using any inhalants during pregnancy may increase the risk of miscarriage, babies born early, birth defects, seizures and sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS). Inform antenatal staff of inhalant use and attend regular antenatal checkups.

If a mother continues to use inhalants while breastfeeding, it is possible that the drug will be present in her milk and may have adverse effects on the baby.

It is generally risky to take any drug while breastfeeding without medical advice.

## SELF-HELP ASSOCIATIONS

**Narcotics Anonymous Australia** is a non profit fellowship or society of recovering addicts who meet regularly to help each other stay clean via a program of complete abstinence from all drugs. [na.org.au](http://na.org.au)

**Smart Recovery** is a voluntary self-help group that assists people in recovering from alcohol, drug use and other addictive behaviours. Visit [www.smartrecoveryaustralia.com.au](http://www.smartrecoveryaustralia.com.au)

**Sexual Health Info Link** provides free and confidential sexual health support and information. Visit [www.shil.nsw.gov.au](http://www.shil.nsw.gov.au)

**Smart Recovery** is a voluntary self-help group that assists people in recovering from alcohol, drug use and other addictive behaviours. Visit [www.smartrecoveryaustralia.com.au](http://www.smartrecoveryaustralia.com.au)

**TAFE NSW** provides help with education, career development or personal matters. Students can contact a local TAFE/university counsellor. Visit [www.tafensw.edu.au](http://www.tafensw.edu.au)

**Youth Action** is the peak organisation for young people in NSW. Visit [www.youthaction.org.au](http://www.youthaction.org.au) and use the search option to access a directory of NSW youth services.

**Youth Solutions** provides services for young people 12 to 25 years of age and the community including prevention and health promotion, drug and alcohol education, community programs and information and referral. Visit [www.youthsolutions.com.au](http://www.youthsolutions.com.au) or call (02) 4628 2319 [provides services to young people in Macarthur & Wingecarribee].

**NSW Health aims to reduce drug-related harm for individuals and the community by providing the facts, including the possible health, social and economic consequences of using alcohol and other drugs.**

A suite of drug and alcohol fact sheets is available to download at: [www.yourroom.com.au](http://www.yourroom.com.au)

