



American Academy of Pediatrics



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Effects of Inhalants

One thing that all inhalants have in common is that they contain chemicals that were never meant for people to consume. So why would anyone breathe toxic chemicals on purpose? Just like the users of other drugs, inhalant abusers try to get "high" from the chemicals.

The effects of inhalants usually last only a few minutes, unless users inhale repeatedly. At first, inhalants have a stimulating effect. Then if the users keep inhaling, they may feel dazed, dizzy, and have trouble walking. Sometimes users get aggressive or think they see things that are not there. Stronger chemicals or repeated inhaling can cause people to pass out. A user can also die suddenly from using inhalants.

When someone uses an inhalant, large amounts of toxic chemicals enter the lungs and pass from the bloodstream into the brain. There they damage and kill brain cells. The amount of fumes a young person inhales greatly exceeds what is considered safe even in a workplace setting. It takes at least 2 weeks for the body to get rid of some of the chemicals in inhalants. Inhalants exit the body mainly through exhaling, which is why an inhalant abuser's breath often smells like chemicals. Inhalants also pass out of the body through urine.

Short-term effects of inhalants are:

- Headaches, nausea, vomiting
- Loss of balance
- Dizziness
- Slurred and slow speech
- Mood changes
- Hallucinations

Over time, inhalants can cause more serious damage, such as:

- Loss of concentration
- Short-term memory loss
- Hearing loss
- Muscle spasms
- Permanent brain damage
- Death

When children are abusing inhalants, many times their parents do not find out until the abuse has already become a habit. Chronic inhalant abusers are hardest to treat because they often have

many serious personal and social problems. They also have difficulty staying off inhalants and have very high rates of relapse. All of these reasons can keep chronic inhalant abusers from benefiting from many drug abuse treatment programs.

Toxic chemicals from inhalants stay in the body for weeks. Because of this, when chronic abusers stop using inhalants they may feel the effects of withdrawal for weeks. Withdrawal is the body's way of getting over its physical addiction to inhalants. During withdrawal from inhalants, a person may have:

- Hand tremors
- Excess sweating
- Constant headaches
- Nervousness

Treatment for inhalant abusers is usually long-term, sometimes as long as 2 years. It must address the many social problems most inhalant abusers have and involves:

- Support of the child's family
- Moving the child away from unhealthy friendships with other abusers
- Teaching and fostering better coping skills
- Building self-esteem and self-confidence
- Helping the child adjust to school or another learning setting

Inhalant abuse is a difficult form of substance abuse to treat. It is best to recognize and start treatment before the problem becomes a habit. Parents and educators need to be able to recognize the signs of inhalant abuse, especially because most abusers do not seek treatment on their own.

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