



Inhalants

by Carol Meyer-Niedzwiecki

Inhalant abuse may be difficult to detect primarily because substances that are inhaled are not themselves drugs. This form of abuse occurs when vapors, fumes, or aerosol sprays of common, available household products are inhaled. This is done by spraying or pouring the product into a bag, onto a cloth or putting the nozzle directly into their mouth and taking a deep breath. This form of substance abuse is typically seen among youth and low income abusers due to the accessibility of the products used.

Inhalant abuse is of great concern because the majority of the chemicals inhaled are toxic and not intended for human consumption. The chemicals take the place of oxygen in the blood and travel directly into the brain. Permanent brain impairment can result as can damage to kidneys, nerves, muscles, the liver, memory or hearing loss, or sudden sniffing death.

One can detect inhalant abuse by staying aware. Are large quantities of household products being bought (by teens) or missing from home cabinets, basements or garages? Are plastic bags, rags, or empty product containers around the child's bedroom? Is there a chemical smell about them, changes in friends, grades, eating habits, or their personal hygiene? Have they become ill more often (sore throats, unexplained nausea, red/runny eyes or nose, sores, face rashes)? Are they often anxious, confused, excitable, or irritable? While under the influence, their speech may be slurred, they may be dizzy or lack coordination. Signs they may have been using and stopped could include: hand tremors, chronic headaches, nervousness and/or excessive sweating.

According to local information from youth participating in the Calhoun County MiPHY/Michigan Profile for Healthy Youth 2010 survey, while inhalant use is not popular, it does happen and is dangerous. 6.9% of 7th graders, 3.8% of 9th graders and 1.3% of 11th graders reported past month use. Female survey participants in both middle and high school had higher levels of use than males.

While most parents may be “in the dark” about this form of abuse, there are preventive actions that can be taken:

- Keep potential poisons out of the reach of young children
- Demonstrate and monitor safe use of medicines and household products
- Talk with your child about drug use (in general) incorporating information about inhalant use. Teach them the facts: inhalants are not drugs, they are risky and potentially deadly chemicals and poisons
- Educate yourself about the effects, consequences, and dangers and have emergency numbers handy in case of accidental ingestion or exposure.

If you suspect use with your child, talk to them, a pharmacist, doctor, counselor, teacher, faith leader, drug counseling center, or the Substance Abuse Council.