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Young People Use Household Products to Get High

If you overhear your teenager talking with a friend about “hardware,” they must be discussing their computers, right? Not necessarily; “hardware” is also a slang term for inhalants. The word “poppers” may describe a cheesy jalapena snack, but it, too, can refer to inhalants. In fact, young people have an entire list of slang terms for inhalants they may use around the house that parents may not understand. The list includes aimees, boppers, gluey, kick, medusa, oz, quicksilver, rush, snappers, Texan shoe shine, toncho, whippets, and whiteout.

Welcome to the world of inhalants, everyday substances that produce chemical vapors that can be inhaled to obtain mind-altering effects. Inhalants have become more popular than marijuana among some groups of young people as a means to get “high.” Typically, users try “huffing” or “sniffing” during their pre-teen and early teen-age years. According to the National Inhalant Prevention Coalition, “1 out of 12 school-aged children in America has intentionally abused a common household product to get high by the time they reach the eighth grade.” Inhalant abuse usually begins about age 10 or 11, but children as young as 6 have been found to experiment with inhalants as well. Inhalants continue to be the drug of choice until about age 14, when marijuana, pain killers, and other drugs become more popular. Nonetheless, a 2007 survey found 15.6% of eighth graders, 13.6% of tenth graders, and 10.5% of twelfth graders had tried inhalants. In addition, the national Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System notes 7.4% of college students and 10.9% of young adults aged 19-28 have used inhalants.

One of the reason inhalants are so popular is because they are so accessible and affordable, and they are not illegal. Over 1400 products found around the home, office, or school can induce a “high” if inhaled, and they are readily available at grocery, convenience, and discount stores. The National Institute on Drug Abuse classifies inhalants into four general categories:

- Volatile solvents (paint thinners, degreasers, dry-cleaning fluids, glue, felt-tip marker fluid, correction fluids, gasoline)
- Aerosols (spray paints, hair sprays, deodorant sprays, vegetable oil sprays, fabric protector sprays, aerosol computer cleaning products, vegetable oil sprays)
- Gases (butane lighters, propane tanks, whipping cream aerosols, refrigerant gases, nitrous oxide)
- Nitrites (video head cleaner, air freshener, leather cleaner)

Just as there are many types of inhalants, there are different methods to get high. Fumes may be snorted from the container, substances may be sprayed directly into the nose or mouth, gases like nitrous oxide can be inhaled from a balloon, or the substance can be placed in a paper or plastic bag (bagging) or poured onto a rag and inhaled.

Although inhalants produce a rapid high resembling alcohol intoxication at first, they all act like anesthetics and slow down the body's functions. Because the intoxicating effect lasts only a few minutes, users often continue to breathe in the fumes repeatedly to extend the effect. Inhaling concentrated substances repeatedly can induce heart failure and death within minutes, and can occur following a single session of inhaling. In addition to the risk of heart failure or suffocation, inhalant abuse adversely affects health in a number of ways. Some effects are irreversible: hearing loss, muscle spasms in the limbs, damage to the brain and central nervous system, and bone marrow damage. Other health consequences may be reversible, but are very serious, like liver and kidney damage and depletion of oxygen in the blood. In the short term, inhalants can cause heart palpitations, breathing difficulty, dizziness, and headaches. Even when inhalant abuse does not cause death, it can lead to seizures and convulsions, vomiting, choking, and coma. Further, inhalants can be highly addictive, and often serve as a "gateway" to other drugs.

Parents need to be on the alert for possible signs that their children are abusing inhalants. Common warning signs include watery or glassy eyes, mood changes, slurred speech, loss of appetite, nausea, red or runny nose or eyes, irritability, muscle weakness, lack of coordination, and depression. Inhalant abuse has also been linked to memory loss, learning problems, failing grades, chronic absences, and apathy. Other tell-tale indications are unusual breath odor, chemical odor on clothing, spots or sores around the mouth, paint or other products staining the face or fingers. Parents should also be concerned if they find gasoline or paint soaked rags or empty spray cans in the child's room, or discover partially-filled or empty butane lighters around the house. If household items seem to go "missing," it may be an indication that someone is using inhalants.

Whether or not a child is abusing inhalants, parents need to talk with their children about inhalants and how serious the consequences can be if they are used. If a parent suspects their child is using inhalants, they should seek professional help immediately. The family physician, a school nurse, or a counselor should be consulted. The Poison Control Center should be contacted at 1-800-222-1222.

Learn more about inhalant abuse during National Inhalants & Poisons Awareness Week, March 16-23rd. Sources include the National Inhalant Prevention Coalition at www.inhalant.org (1-800-269-4237), Parents The Antidrug at www.theantidrug.com (1-800-662-4357), and the National Institute on Drug Abuse at www.drugabuse.gov (1-301-443-1124). For information about other public health concerns, contact the Central Connecticut Health District at www.ccthd.org (860-721-2824).