

## Inhalant Use: The Hidden “Drug”

Protecting our youth from risky behaviors is often at the forefront of schools, parents and our youth-serving community organizations. One such risk that we hope to prevent our youth from engaging in is substance use. According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), the developing adolescent brain is not fully developed until early adulthood (around 24-25 years of age). Use of alcohol or other drugs during this critical time in brain development can lead to difficulties in memory, problem solving and decision making. Substance use can also change the way the reward center of the brain works, making it harder to feel good naturally. As an organization that works to enhance substance use prevention initiatives through education, SCIP strives to provide our communities with information that can help engage youth in conversations surrounding the dangers of substance use. Substances of abuse that should be part of prevention conversations include alcohol, marijuana, prescription drugs, tobacco/vaping products and other illegal drugs. A less obvious substance of abuse that should also be part of our substance use prevention conversations are inhalants. According to NIDA, “inhalants are mostly used by young kids and teens and are the only class of substance used more by younger than by older teens”.

Inhalants are chemicals found in ordinary household, school and workplace products. They are legal to purchase and may be easier for youth to access compared to other drugs (NIDA). These products include items like spray paints, paint thinner, felt-tip markers, glue and gasoline. While these products are harmless when used as intended, when the vapors from these products are intentionally inhaled to get high, they become potentially toxic and sometimes fatal. Inhalants are used by breathing in the fumes through the nose or mouth in a variety of ways. Inhalant use is sometimes referred to as “sniffing”, “huffing”, or “bagging”, depending on the substance or equipment being used. In Lincoln recently, the Lincoln Police Department put out a warning to parents and school professionals to be on the “lookout for huffing” after officers received reports over a period of two weeks of youth using air horns to get high. Referred to as air horn huffing, the high is achieved by squeezing the trigger of an air horn and inhaling the compressed gas through the mouth.



Inhalants produce a quick and powerful high because the lungs absorb the chemicals into the bloodstream quickly, sending them throughout the brain and body. The high associated with inhalant use occurs within a few seconds. Short term effects are similar to alcohol intoxication (slurred speech, lack of coordination, dizziness and euphoria). The high only lasts a few minutes and as such, the user may inhale the fumes repeatedly to continue the high. Inhalant use is especially dangerous as it is hard to control the dosing. Without education, young people may not realize the danger of this type of high and may not associate inhalants as a “drug” because they are common, everyday products. However, the reality is that inhaling these dangerous fumes even just once can cause damage to the brain or even lead to death. “Sudden sniffing death” can occur from a one-time use of inhalants and is more closely associated with the abuse of butane, propane and chemicals in aerosols. Inhalant abuse can also cause death by asphyxiation, suffocation and choking. Aside from death, regular use of inhalants can cause serious harm to the brain and body including heart damage, liver failure, muscle weakness, damage to

brain cells and nerve damage. Unfortunately, damage to organs as a result of inhalant abuse is not reversible.

If you have concerns about someone in your life abusing inhalants, there are some signs you can look for:

- Chemical odors on breath or clothing
- Paint or other stains on the face, hands, or clothing
- Hidden empty spray paint or solvent containers, or rags soaked with chemicals
- Drunk or disoriented behaviors
- Frequent nose bleeds or sinus infections
- Slurred speech
- Confusion, inattentiveness, lack of coordination, irritability, or depression
- Purchase of excessive amounts of products used as inhalants

It is never too early to seek help if you have concerns someone you know may be abusing inhalants. Support comes in multiple forms and may include: medical care, individual or family therapy or professional treatment for substance abuse and addiction. If you aren't sure where to start, SCIP can be a helpful resource to connect you to school and community supports as well as education. To learn more about SCIP, please visit [www.scipnebraska.com](http://www.scipnebraska.com).

References: American Addiction Centers; Journal of Pediatrics and Child Health; National Institute of Health; National Institute on Drug Abuse; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)