

Volatile Substance Abuse

Background/Purpose

Inhaling solvents or volatile substances is part of the broader alcohol and other drug use spectrum. Volatile substances are often used when more appealing drug options are not available. Users are generally young people, although adults are known to be consumers as well. Most children are occasional inhalers, often mixing with a small cohort of long term sniffers.

Some facts

Volatile substances release fumes or vapours that can cause damage to the brain and other side effects when inhaled. This is called volatile substance abuse (VSA).

Examples of volatile substances include:

- petrol
- lighter fuels
- spray paint
- glue
- deodorant
- correction fluid

More information about volatile substances can be found on the [Alcohol and Drug Foundation website \(adf.org\)](http://adf.org).

Inhaled chemicals are quickly absorbed through the lungs into the bloodstream and are spread to the brain and other organs. Within minutes, the user can experience varying degrees of intoxication, with symptoms similar to those caused by drinking alcohol. As the effect only lasts only a few minutes, some users prolong the experience by inhaling repeatedly.

Sniffing is always risky, but some situations make it even more dangerous, including:

- sniffing in an enclosed space or indoors
- running or doing other strenuous physical activity after sniffing (this could cause death due to cardiac effects)
- mixing sniffing with medicines or illegal drugs
- sniffing while suffering from other health problems.

In extreme cases, there is a risk of sudden death from cardiac arrest as a result of sniffing inhalants. Inhaling solvents can cause arrhythmia, an irregular muscle contraction of the heart. If the user doesn't receive prompt medical attention, the heart can lose the ability to pump blood. This is a rapid and unpredictable experience.

Loss of consciousness and death can also happen several hours after inhalation from respiratory depression. This means the user's breathing slows to a dangerous level and can reduce oxygen supply. Additionally, vomiting while the user is intoxicated or sedated can lead to choking, and cooling agents found in some inhalants such as from aerosol cans, can freeze the throat and cause suffocation.

Sniffing poses a risk of hypoxia, which is the reduction of oxygen levels in the blood, as users restrict the amount of fresh air they inhale.

What you should do

If you are concerned someone may be at risk of severe harm from volatile substance use, you should encourage them to be assessed at the local health service provider as soon as possible. The fundamental starting point is a comprehensive physical and social and emotional wellbeing assessment. This can also be supported by a referral to your local youth service or Alcohol and Other Drugs service.

Health services can provide initial brief interventions and appropriate referrals to other specialists and diversional activities.

For schools located in Multi Agency Community and Child Safety Teams (MACCST) communities, any child/young person who may be of significant concern, and a need for a multi-agency approach is identified, should be referred to MACCST. For more information, go to [MACCST – Community Fact Sheet \(nt.gov.au\)](http://nt.gov.au).

Resources from Menzies School of Health are available that include flip charts, presentations and videos in Warlpiri, Kriol, Yolngu and English. Most community health centres hold these in their libraries. Refer to [Resources \(menzies.edu.au\)](http://menzies.edu.au).

Referral for specialist VSA assessment is indicated if it is reasonably believed the individual is at risk of severe harm. This is best done through the local health service. If a minor is referred for VSA assessment, then a mandatory report to the Department of Territory Families, Housing and Communities for assessment should also be made.

Residents and communities can apply to have a place declared a VSA management area and have a management plan approved. This helps to control the possession, sale and supply, use and storage of volatile substances within that area.

For more information about how to make a VSA assessment referral or have a place declared a VSA management area, visit the Department of Health website.

Further Resources

[Volatile Substance Use - Alcohol and Other Drugs Knowledge Centre \(ecu.edu.au\)](http://ecu.edu.au)

The Alcohol and other Drugs Knowledge Centre provides comprehensive information, fact sheets, research evidence and links to support programs to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

[Drugs and the law \(nt.gov.au\)](http://nt.gov.au)

This Northern Territory Government website includes information related to legislation and diversionary programs for young people.

[Legislation Database \(nt.gov.au\)](http://nt.gov.au)

This website includes the *Volatile Substance abuse Prevention Act 2005*.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ACMqfUirbvw>

This video contains important facts that people of any age should know about huffing (another name for sniffing) of volatile substances. The video can also be used when training community, social and health workers.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fek_corJlgo

This animated infographic provides an audio visual representation about volatile substance use among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.