

# The Dangers of Teens & Inhalants

Could whipped cream canisters and nail polish remover really be a dangerous for your child? Experts say yes, based on recent news and trends. Here's what you need to know to recognize problematic issues with your child.

By **Lisa Lewis**



Good for you if you've talked to your kids about the dangers of drugs and alcohol. But you're not done yet. Many of the products you have around the house, such as correction fluid and aerosol hair spray, can be even more harmful than many illegal drugs if deliberately inhaled.

Misuse of seemingly innocuous household products is part of a growing and dangerous trend among teens and tweens that can have fatal consequences. Called

huffing, sniffing, or dusting, it's on the rise even as overall drug use by teens continues to decrease. Last year, the Partnership for a Drug-Free America found that approximately one in four eighth-graders had tried huffing at least once (yes, you read that number right).

Some of the most common inhalants include:

- compressed air computer cleaners
- nail polish remover
- correction fluid
- butane lighter refills
- aerosol spays such as spray paint, hair spray, deodorant, and even whipped cream

"Just look under your kitchen sink or in your cupboards," says Harvey Weiss, executive director of the National Inhalant Prevention Coalition in Austin, Texas.

"There's a menu of products that can be misused."

## Dangers of Huffing

Kids use household products to get high because those items are cheap and easily available. But while the products themselves are perfectly safe when used as directed, they can be fatal if used as inhalants. "Even a single use can cause death," says David Shurtleff, PhD, a division director at the National Institute on Drug Abuse in Bethesda, Maryland.

The worst-case consequences are cardiac arrest (known as Sudden Sniffing Death syndrome) or suffocation due to lack of oxygen, but cumulative injury can occur as well. "With prolonged use, you can damage just about any organ in the body, including the brain, heart, lungs, liver, and kidneys," Shurtleff says.

## Recognizing the Signs

Kids who are sniffing inhalants may appear to be in a drunken daze. Other common signs include chemical odors on the breath and paint stains on the face or hands, along with slurred speech and red, runny eyes.

There can be clues around the house as well. "Look for products in the child's room or under their bed or in their backpack that don't seem to make sense," Weiss says. Other warning flags include aerosol products that mysteriously go missing or quickly become empty.

## How to Have the Talk

With kids trying huffing as early as fourth grade, it's never too early to raise the topic. When you're using a potentially harmful household product—painting a room, for example—take the opportunity to talk about the risks from inhaling the fumes. Point out the warning labels on the product.

You can also get the message across by talking about inhalants as poisons rather than drugs. "The word 'poison' says it all," Weiss says. "Parents can point out that even though these are everyday legal products, they become poisons if misused."

Broach the subject by asking your child if any of his friends are dusting or huffing (kids use these terms rather than "inhalant abuse"). Finding out how familiar your kid is with the topic can be a good way to open a discussion about the potential dangers.

And don't make the mistake of thinking that inhalant abuse is just a guy thing. Recent data make clear that it's just as important for parents to talk to their daughters as to their sons. "Any child is vulnerable," Weiss says.

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