

Solvents: Frequently Asked Questions

What are solvents?

Solvents (also known as inhalants and volatile substances) are a range of products which, when vaporised and inhaled, can cause people to feel intoxicated or 'high'.

What products are abused?

Any product that contains solvents, fuel gases, aerosol propellants and can be inhaled to cause intoxication can be abused. These are widely available over the counter and include:

- Household aerosol sprays: paint, hair spray, fabric protectors and analgesics.
- Gases: butane cigarette lighter refills, refrigerant gases, fuel gases such as butane, propane and LPG.
- Industrial and domestic cleaning products.
- Solvents, glues and correction fluid.

The most commonly misused solvents in Victoria at present are spray paints and butane cigarette lighter refills. Solvent abuse trends change from time to time.

What harms are caused by solvent abuse?

Solvents are poisonous if abused, and can slow down the heart, brain and breathing. They can cause loss of balance, slurred speech and disorientation—effects similar to being drunk. Regular 'sniffers' can have fits or hallucinations and even 'blackout'. Solvent abuse causes sneezing, coughing, salivation and red eyes. Long term effects include serious heart, liver and brain damage.

Can solvent sniffing kill?

Yes. Sniffing large amounts of solvents too quickly can cause an 'overdose' resulting in a person having heart problems or a 'blackout'. This can be very dangerous, especially if the person is alone or their friends get frightened and run away. Solvent sniffing has led to injury and death from falls or accidents due to an intoxicated person suffering from agitation, hallucinations, loss of balance or confusion.

How are solvents misused?

The vapours from solvents can be sniffed or snorted directly or by spraying or squirting into a plastic bag. They can also be sprayed onto a rag and inhaled.

Who abuses solvents?

People who abuse solvents can come from all walks of life. However, abusers fall into 3 main groups:

- **Experimental:** Young people under 18 years. (However it is more likely to be young people between the ages of 10 and 16 years.)
- **Occasional/Regular:** Young people who sniff with their peers.
- **Chronic:** Users who may be socially isolated, have emotional problems or difficulties at home or at school.

Why do young people choose to misuse solvents?

Solvent abusers are looking for effects that change the way they feel; such as wanting to feel 'out of it' or drunk. They are often bored, angry or lonely and may feel unloved and unwanted. They are often easily influenced by peer pressure and have a need to be part of the gang. They choose solvents because they are cheap and readily available.

How do I know if someone has been sniffing solvents?

There are some obvious signs that someone has been sniffing solvents.

- The smell of vapour on the clothes or breath.
- A rash or sore spots around the mouth.
- Red and watering eyes and a runny nose.
- Appearing to be drunk or falling over.
- Paint stains around the mouth, skin or on the clothes.
- Confusion or disorientation.

Does solvent abuse affect behaviour?

Solvent abuse can cause agitation and hallucinations. Long term sniffers can become very aggressive and paranoid. (They think everyone is out to get them). They can suffer mood swings, anxiety and depression. Their behaviour can be very threatening and unpredictable. Regular 'sniffers' often get involved in petty crime and theft. Some may steal the products they abuse.

Can I be prosecuted for refusing to sell solvents to customers?

No, there is a law preventing the sale of deleterious substances (solvents) if the retailer 'knows' or has 'reasonable cause' to believe the purchaser is going to use it (or sell or supply to another) for harmful purposes. (*Drugs Poisons and Controlled Substances Act 1981, Sections 57 and 58.*)

Responsible sale
of solvents