

What is solvent and volatile substance abuse (VSA)?

VSA is when solvents and volatile substances are inhaled through the mouth and/or nose for the sole purpose of getting a 'high.'

Volatile substances are depressants which slow down the activity of the brain and central nervous system. This results in messages to and from the brain being slowed down, affecting the physical, mental and emotional responses. But unlike other drugs, volatile substances are unique in the fact that they can also be stimulants and cause hallucinations.

What are solvents & volatile substances?

Solvents and volatile substances are a range of products (many are everyday household items) that give off an intoxicating vapour.

There are two ingredients that are candidates for 'sniffing' - solvents and gases. They are described as volatile substances because they readily evaporate at room temperature and in doing so give off a 'sniffable' vapour.

Solvents - are used to keep products dissolved until they are ready for use, e.g. to pour, spread or squirt and then to evaporate from the product quickly without a trace. This quick evaporation and volatility gives the intoxicating effect. If solvents were not used, the products would solidify in their containers.

As well as solvents being used to keep the products in a liquid state, they are also used to dissolve and liquefy materials once they have gone solid, i.e. nail varnish remover.

Gases - These are fuel gases, i.e. cigarette lighter refills or propellants.

Propellants are pressurised liquid gases used to propel the contents (deodorant, hairspray, paint, etc.) from the container. There are a number of these, but the main propellant used these days is butane.

There are more than a hundred commercially available products that are now used to get a 'high.' In the home there may be over thirty 'sniffable' products. Below are some of the products that can be 'sniffed':

- Cigarette lighter refills
- Aerosols - deodorants, hairspray, paint spray, pain-relieving spray, air freshener, fly spray, etc.
- Solvent-based adhesives
- Some typewriter correction fluids
- Nail varnish and nail varnish remover
- Dry-cleaning fluids
- Paint thinners and paint removers
- Fire extinguishers
- UHT cream - whipped cream cans
- Damp Start
- Dyes (for shoes)
- Cleaning agents - degreasing materials, plaster remover, etc.

'Street' Names

Listed below are some of the terms/names used to describe VSA:

- Glue sniffing
- Solvent abuse/misuse
- Tooting - describes the misuse of gas and aerosols
- Sniffing
- Inhaling
- Buzzing gas