

working to prevent solvent abuse

Factsheet 4 - Who Sniffs?

Who sniffs solvents and volatile substances?

People who 'sniff' solvents have been categorised into four groups: experimental, social, problematic and chronic.

The majority of young people fall into the experimental category, which very often is just a part of their growing up and for most is just a passing interest. However, with the risk of death on the first experiment, this needs addressing seriously. We need to reach young people with the facts before they hear inaccurate information from any uninformed individuals.

Experimental Use

The majority of young people fall into this category and only try solvents once or twice. This is mainly because they are curious, or others are doing it and solvents are cheap and easily available.

Social Use

This is when young people 'sniff' solvents in a recreational or social way with friends. The amount of use varies depending on what else is happening in their lives. Very often this is just a phase in their life and stops when they find other interests, change their peer group or simply grow out of this practice.

Problematic Use

This is when people start to see their sniffing as more important than other activities. Underlying reasons for problematic use include hassles with friends or family, health effects, financial pressure and using solvents as a way of managing difficult feelings, stresses or situations.

Chronic Use

Only a very small number of people become chronic users. With chronic use, more regular and increasing amounts need to be taken to get the same effect. They may use alone or with others. Those who use chronically may also have other problems, such as difficulties at home, depression, anxiety, low achievement at school, etc. They often use solvents as a way of managing their problems or as a way of trying to escape from them.

How do you identify a 'sniffer'?

Signs of 'sniffing' are difficult to distinguish from normal adolescent behaviour. However, any of the following may indicate that someone has a 'sniffing' problem.

The most affective way to identify if someone is sniffing is to find the physical evidence as listed below.

- Empty butane gas, aerosol or glue containers left where the person has been. Look for teeth marks on nozzles, towels with white marks on, bags containing glue, etc.
- Disappearance of aerosols, glues, etc. from around the home.

However, finding this may not necessarily mean that the person is sniffing. You should always approach the person about the issue calmly, with an open mind.

Another indication that someone may be sniffing is one or more of the following physical symptoms. However, a lot of the symptoms 'kick in' quickly and wear off quickly, so it can be difficult to identify the following signs and symptoms:

Signs and Symptoms

- 'Drunken' behaviour such as lack of coordination and coherence
- A chemical smell on their clothing, hair or breath
- Dilated pupils
- Pale complexion
- Red, puffy, watery eyes
- Persistent runny nose
- Rashes or spots around the nose and mouth (only occurs with certain products)

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- Irritation of the throat with coughing or gagging
- Nausea/vomiting
- Headaches

Watch out for...

Another key area to watch out for is changes in the person's life style. For instance:

- Suddenly mixing with a new group of friends, especially if they hang out in secluded places
- Mood swings or changes in attitude
- Aggressive irritable behaviour
- Altered sleep patterns
- Change in appetite
- Unusually withdrawn behaviour

N.B. Many of the signs and symptoms listed above could be due to other reasons. In reality it is not possible to identify a 'sniffer' from these symptoms alone, the whole picture must be taken into account.

What if you suspect someone is sniffing?

- Try not to panic: Try to stay calm, even though it can be difficult. This way they will be more likely to discuss their problem with you.
- Talk and listen: Listen to them – find out what is happening and why. Try to see things from their point of view – don't offer your own preconceptions. The misuser may only be experimenting.
- Show your concern: Make it clear that you are concerned and you want them to be safe.
- Support: Don't be judgemental but show compassion and understanding. They may just need some support in a situation to guide them through.
- Seek professional help: If you know they are regularly 'sniffing' solvents they may need some extra help and support.

What should I do..?

If they are 'high':

- Keep calm – Assess the situation, in particular the risks to yourself.
- Stay with them - as long as the situation is safe.
- Ensure adequate ventilation by opening windows or loosening tight clothing, etc.
- Keep the 'sniffer' calm and still. There is a risk of sudden death if exertion follows 'sniffing'. **Don't chase or over excite them.**
- Remove the solvents from them – don't use force.
- When they are 'high' it is not the best time to discuss their 'sniffing' problem. Being supportive at this stage will open channels for later communication.
- Stay with them until the effects have worn off.

If they are unconscious:

- Keep calm – Assess the situation, in particular, the risks to yourself.
- See if the person responds by gentle shaking or loud talking.
- Check their **A**irway, **B**reathing and **C**irculation and apply first aid if you know how.
- Place them on their side in the recovery position.
- Call an ambulance or if possible send someone and inform the emergency workers where you are, what has been taken and what they may require e.g. cardiac defibrillation.
- Stay with them if you can and keep them warm and still.