

Volatile Substance Abuse Guidance and Assessment Tool

- Information to Give -

What is solvent and volatile substance abuse (VSA)?

VSA is when solvents or other volatile substances are inhaled through the mouth and/or nose for the 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 slowing down, affecting the physical, mental and emotional responses. The symptoms and effects from sniffing volatile substances are very similar to alcohol intoxication, although the speed of onset is much more rapid and can include other symptoms. Recovery time is also much quicker than alcohol intoxication. Volatile substances can also cause hallucinations.

What are the dangers of inhaling products?

Anyone inhaling volatile substances is at risk of **SUDDEN DEATH**, which can occur at any time— whether a first time user or a long-term, chronic user. Death can occur due to the following:

- **Heart failure:** This is known as 'Sudden Sniffing Death Syndrome'. The heart becomes oversensitive to adrenaline and beats ineffectively. Any surge of adrenaline can cause the heart to stop pumping blood.
- **Fatal accidents when 'high' or hallucinating:** Accidents with automobiles, drownings and falls from high places have all been associated with VSA.
- **Burns and explosions:** Many of these products are highly flammable and if sniffed at the same time as smoking, or using a naked flame, can cause burns, fires or explosions.
- **Suffocation or asphyxiation** – when someone is unable to breathe in sufficient oxygen, e.g. perhaps because they are choking or because they have a bag or mask over their nose and mouth.
- **Choking on vomit:** As a result of vomiting when blackout has occurred.
- **Respiratory Centre Depression:** From mixing products with other depressants.

Please note: if the person is using Amyl Nitrite (poppers) please inform them that there is now evidence to suggest poppers can cause permanent eye damage, and advise them of the importance of practicing safe sex.

Reducing the Risks

When inhaled, volatile substances have the direct capacity to suddenly and unpredictably kill and there is no way to avoid this risk. However, if no advice is likely to encourage a user to stop VSA immediately, it may be appropriate to give information that helps them avoid some of the other risks. VSA could still kill you, but if you choose to abuse volatile substances:

- Do not abuse alone (if another person is present they can call an ambulance if needed)
- Avoid spraying directly into the mouth (this will lower the risk of stopping the heart)
- Avoid using plastic bags (this will lower the risk of suffocation)
- Do not use lighted cigarettes in the vicinity (this will lower the risk of burns/explosions)
- Do not mix with other depressants (legal or illegal) (this will lower the risk of slowing the body down to the extent that it stops functioning)
- Do not mix with stimulant drugs (increased adrenaline levels can increase the risk of cardiac arrhythmia)

Inhalation of these products is not physically addictive, it is psychologically addictive only and abuse can stop at any time with no physical withdrawal symptoms experienced. Motivation is all that is needed.

Legal note: If the person is under the age of 18, please inform your local Trading Standards Department of the place of purchase. Retailers can be prosecuted for selling any product to someone under the age of 18 if they suspect/know that it is to be used to achieve intoxication – and are not permitted to sell cigarette lighter refills to under-18s under any circumstances.