

## Re-Solv guidance on VSA ('solvent abuse') policy for schools and other educational settings

Volatile substance abuse ('VSA', also known as 'solvent abuse') involves the inhalation of fumes from everyday household products - often cigarette lighter refills or aerosols such as hairspray and deodorants. As such, they are the only 'drugs' allowed in schools and other educational settings. Many people are either unaware that VSA exists or make the assumption that because these products are 'legal' they are 'safe'. In fact, volatile substances when inhaled can kill suddenly and unpredictably, and there is no way to avoid this risk.

### What is 'VSA'?

A range of chemicals are described as 'volatile substances' because they readily evaporate at room temperature, giving off a vapour. Volatile substance abuse or 'VSA' is when these substances are deliberately inhaled through the mouth and/or nose to achieve a change in mental state or 'high'. The most dangerous abused products are butane gas from cigarette lighter refills and aerosols (such as deodorants or hair sprays), petrol and some glues. In recent years, the most commonly abused product has become nitrous oxide, usually inhaled from balloons.

VSA continues to be an issue for young people in the UK. Most recent statistics show that 4.2% of young people in England aged 11-15 have used volatile substances in order to get high in the last 12 months<sup>1</sup>. VSA is the most common form of substance abuse among children under 14-years-old. For 14 and 15-year-olds VSA is second only to cannabis<sup>1</sup>.

8-10 young people die from the abuse of volatile substances every year across the UK. Between 2001 and 2016, 170 young people under the age of 20 have died from the abuse of these products<sup>2</sup>.

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### Policy Considerations

It is essential that all schools have considered volatile substances under their current substance misuse policy. UK Government guidance for school leaders and staff on managing drugs and drug-related incidences in schools can be found at [www.gov.uk/government/publications/drugs-advice-for-schools](http://www.gov.uk/government/publications/drugs-advice-for-schools).

### Butane cigarette lighter refills

The sale of this product is banned to under 18s in the UK under The Cigarette Lighter Refill (Safety) Regulations 1999. Butane (in cigarette lighter refills and other products) has accounted for 50% of all VSA deaths (328 of 653 deaths) since 2001<sup>2</sup>.

Cigarette lighter refills should be included in any list of prohibited items. The legal status should allow for a no-tolerance position and the product should be confiscated and not returned.

## Aerosols

When used for their intended purposes, aerosols are safe. They have been extensively tested for consumer safety. However, when abused aerosols can kill – since 2001 there have been 30 deaths attributed to the abuse of aerosols. The abuse of deodorants accounts for the most deaths within the aerosol category.

Schools need to consider the possibility of aerosol abuse and decide on a position that they are comfortable with. Guidelines to consider might be that aerosols are limited to 1 per student, or that aerosols are to be kept in lockers when on school premises.

## Other products

There is an extensive list of volatile substances that can be abused. In the UK the primary products are those listed above, though a school might also want to consider the misuse of petrol, nail varnish remover, ‘poppers’, nitrous oxide (‘whippets’), computer duster sprays and some industrial strength glues. Some items that young people used to get ‘high’ in the past – like highlighters and everyday consumer glue – are no longer abusable. If you would like further advice, please contact us on the details below.

Schools might want to consider adding a line into their drug and alcohol policy that effectively covers all volatile substances without naming specific products.

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A drug and alcohol policy is an essential tool for all education establishments and any well considered strategy will include VSA. The risk of ignoring volatile substances under any policy is the potential for a tragedy that reaches out beyond the school and into the community. Please consider the best way for your establishment to tackle this issue.

Re-Solv recommends that all schools educate their students about the dangers of VSA. If you would like further information on Re-Solv’s education and prevention sessions for primary, secondary and further education please contact us on the details below.

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<sup>1</sup> *Smoking, drinking and drug use among young people in England in 2018*, NHS Digital, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> All mortality statistics cited here are from *Deaths related to the misuse of volatile substances and helium in Great Britain, 2001 to 2016*, Office for National Statistics