

Re-Solv guidance on gas and solvent use ('solvent abuse') for schools and other educational settings

Gas and solvent use involves the deliberate 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 the practice exists or make the assumption that because these products are 'legal' they are 'safe'. In fact, gases and solvents when inhaled directly can kill suddenly and unpredictably, and there is no way to avoid this risk.

What do we mean by 'gas & solvent use'?

There are a range of household chemicals that readily evaporate at room temperature, giving off a vapour. 'Gas and solvent use' is when these substances are deliberately inhaled through the mouth and/or nose to achieve intoxication. The most dangerous 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 misused product has become nitrous oxide, usually inhaled from balloons.

Gas and solvent use continues to be an issue for young people in the UK. Most recent statistics show that 2.4% of young people in England aged 11-15 have used gases and solvents in order to achieve intoxication in the last 12 months¹. Gas and solvent use is the most common form of substance misuse among children under 14-years-old. For 14 and 15-year-olds gas and solvent use is second only to cannabis¹.

Around four young people die from the misuse of gases and solvents every year across the UK. Between 2001 and 2020, 149 young people under the age of 20 died from the misuse of these products².

Policy Considerations

It is essential that all schools have considered gases and solvents 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.

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 59% of all gas and solvent use deaths (426 of 716 deaths) since 2001².

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 intentionally inhaled aerosols can kill – since 2001 there have been 29 deaths attributed to the intentional inhalation of aerosols. The misuse of deodorants accounts for the most deaths within the aerosol category.

Schools need to consider the possibility of intentional aerosol inhalation 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

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 – no longer cause intoxication. 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 gases and solvents without naming specific products.

A drug and alcohol policy is an essential tool for all education establishments and any well considered strategy will include gases and solvents. The risk of ignoring gases and solvents 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 gas and solvent use. 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.

¹ *Smoking, drinking and drug use among young people in England in 2021*, NHS Digital, 2022.

² All mortality statistics cited here are from *Deaths related to the misuse of volatile substances and helium in Great Britain, 2001 to 2020*, Office for National Statistics

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