

inhalants

■ **Overview:** Inhalants are a huge group of chemicals with one thing in common: Each can be inhaled for its intoxicating effects. Thousands of commercial and industrial products (glues, fuels, solvents, paints, and propellants) have been used as inhalants, along with a small group of gases intended for medical and dental procedures.



■ **Types/Forms:** Solvents, aerosols, nitrites. Volatile solvents are chemicals made from petroleum and natural gas. (“Volatile” means they evaporate when exposed to air; solvents dissolve other substances.) Aerosols are sprays that contain intoxicating propellants. The nitrites group includes two gases used in medical/dental procedures: amyl nitrite and nitrous oxide (“laughing gas”). Variants of amyl nitrite are also used, including butyl nitrite and cyclohexyl nitrite.

■ **Actions/Effects:** Inhalants usually trigger an alcohol-like stupor, with euphoria, hallucinations, and delusions. Physical effects include increased or irregular heartbeat, headache, slowed breathing, and coma. Nitrous oxide causes numbness and giddiness, sometimes with a sensation of floating.



■ **Medical Uses:** Solvents and aerosols: None. Amyl nitrite: Treatment for angina pectoris. Nitrous oxide: Dental anesthetic.

■ **Risks/Side Effects:** Headache, ringing in the ears, coughing, vomiting, and pain in the chest, muscles, or joints. Sudden death can result from a sudden burst of activity (sometimes triggered by sniffing-related delusions) or from irregular heartbeat. Suffocation is also a risk for sniffers who pass out with a plastic bag over the nose and mouth or in an enclosed space with a leaking gas source. Long-term risks vary, but include brain and nervous system damage, and toxic effects to the lungs, liver, and kidneys.



■ **Duration:** Solvents: 15-45 minutes. Nitrites: 30 seconds-3 minutes. Nitrous oxide: minutes.

■ **Trends:** Aerosols are less of a problem today than in the past, as intoxicating propellant gases have been replaced by pressurized carbon dioxide and nitrogen. Attempts have also been made to control the contents of household products to reduce risk, but solvents will continue to be around, in both the home and industry, and the lungs and brains of those who don't respect their dangers.

■ **Demographics:** Use tends to decrease with age. In a 2006 national survey, 9.1 percent of U.S. 8th-graders admitted using inhalants during the previous year, compared with only 4.5 percent of high school seniors.



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