

# A QUICK GUIDE TO **Drugs & Alcohol**

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**THIRD EDITION**

by the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC)

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Health



NEW SOUTH WALES

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# INHALANTS

***The street names of inhalants depend on the product used. For example, amyl nitrite is sometimes called ‘amyl’ or ‘poppers’, while nitrous oxide may be called ‘bulbs’.***

Inhalants are substances that are sniffed to give the user an immediate ‘high’. These substances are easily absorbed through the lungs and carried to the brain, where they act to slow down the central nervous system. This means they are classed as depressants (see definition on page 3).

## **Types of inhalants**

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The main categories of inhalants are:

- volatile solvents (including aerosols)
- nitrites
- gases.

### **Volatile solvents**

Volatile solvents are substances that change rapidly from a liquid or semi-solid state to a gas when exposed to air. They are found in a range of readily obtainable products, including:

- petrol
- paint thinner
- spray paint
- paint removers
- hair spray
- deodorants
- air fresheners
- lighter fuels
- propellant gases used in aerosol spray cans.



### ***Aerosols***

Some volatile solvents that come in an aerosol spray can, such as hair spray and many deodorants, are inhaled for the effects produced not only by the product's main ingredient, but by the aerosol's propellant gases.

### ***'Chroming'***

Gold, silver and other metallic spray paints are sniffed mainly for the effects caused by the solvents used to suspend the metallic particles in the spray. Sniffing metallic paints is called 'chroming'.

### **Nitrites**

Nitrites have historically been used to enhance sexual experience. The most popular are amyl nitrite and butyl nitrite.

**Amyl nitrite** relaxes most of the muscles involved in non-conscious processes, such as digestion and breathing. Among other things, it dilates blood vessels, increasing their diameter, which leads to increased heart rate and body temperature (the 'rush').

These drugs are occasionally used for their muscle-relaxing rather than their psychoactive properties, in particular in conjunction with anal sex.

**Nitrous oxide** ('laughing gas') is the most popular anaesthetic inhalant, and is often associated with the dance and rave scenes.

## Gases

Inhalants that come in a gaseous form include products used in medical anaesthetics (such as ether or chloroform).

## Inhalants and the law

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Most inhalants are common products and are readily available.

The sale of amyl nitrite is prohibited by law; however, it is sold in some adult stores under the guise of room deodorants, video head cleaners or leather cleaners.

## How inhalants are used

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Inhalants are usually inhaled directly from the container or sprayed onto a cloth, and then inhaled. If a plastic bag is used there may be increased risk of suffocation.

Petrol fumes are sniffed from a can or a bottle, or from a cloth soaked in petrol and held over the nose and mouth.

### Petrol-sniffing

Long-term petrol-sniffing has many serious effects. Chronic use may cause irreversible brain damage. Lead poisoning, which can result in liver, kidney and brain damage, is also a major problem (in leaded petrol only).



# Effects

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## Short-term effects

Some of the short-term effects of using inhalants are similar to those of alcohol, such as:

- slurred speech
- blurred vision
- dizziness
- nausea
- euphoria
- loss of coordination.

Other short-term effects may include:

- irritation of the eyes and throat
- hallucinations
- loss of memory
- headaches
- nose bleeds.

Some inhalants, such as amyl nitrite, can cause enhanced sensual awareness and a loss of inhibitions.

Amyl nitrate is immuno-suppressive; a person's immune response dips immediately on inhaling it, and stays down for about 96 hours.

Using a plastic bag to inhale substances increases the risk of suffocation.

## Long-term effects

Little research has been done on the long-term effects of most inhalants. Possible health problems may include:

- brain damage affecting coordination, movement and memory
- weight loss
- fatigue and tremors
- paranoia, hostility and depression
- social and psychological delays in development.

## Inhalants and driving

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It is not safe to drive while using inhalants, given their effects on vision and coordination.

## **Inhalants and pregnancy**

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It is generally risky to take any drug while pregnant or breastfeeding without medical advice.

Using inhalants during pregnancy may increase the risk of miscarriage, premature birth, birth defects and sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS).

## **Using inhalants with other drugs**

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Combining amyl nitrate and Viagra is particularly problematic. It may cause loss of consciousness and, in extreme cases, even death.

## **Dependence**

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Psychological dependence—that is, using inhalants to help cope with the problems of everyday life—may develop with prolonged use. Physical dependence (see definition on page 4) can also occur, as the person develops a tolerance to the substance they are using.

## **Withdrawal**

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Chronic users may have withdrawal symptoms such as hand tremors and headaches when they stop using the drugs.

## **Overdose**

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The possibility of death from using inhalants is rare, however it is a risk. ‘Sudden sniffing death’ has followed the use of a range of inhalants including aerosols and correction fluids. It is believed that chemicals in these products can cause heart failure, particularly if the user is stressed or does heavy exercise after inhaling.

If nitrites are swallowed they can interfere with the blood’s ability to transport oxygen. Death from a lack of oxygen, pneumonia, cardiac failure or cardiac arrest, or from breathing in vomit, is a possible consequence.

## **Treatment**

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Little research has been carried out on treatments for inhalant abuse.

Evidence from better-researched drugs suggests that services providing good social support, as well as psychological interventions to help maintain motivation and improve coping skills, are likely to be useful (see pages 7-8).