Solvents

VSA, Volatile substance abuse

What are solvents?

Some organic - that is, carbon based - compounds can produce effects similar to alcohol or anaesthetics when their vapours are inhaled. A number are used as solvents in glues, paints, nail varnish removers, dry cleaning fluids and de-greasing compounds. Others are used as propellant gases in aerosols and fire extinguishers or as fuels such as petrol or cigarette lighter gas
(butane). Most households, factories and offices use a range of solvents which can be sniffed.

These products give off vapours or are gases at normal temperatures and can be inhaled through the mouth or nose to give an intoxicating effect. This is sometimes called 'glue sniffing', 'solvent abuse' or
'volatile substance abuse' (VSA). Solvents may be directly inhaled, sniffed from inside a plastic or paper bag, or put on a rag before sniffing

UK Situation

In any given area, a proportion of adolescents mainly aged between 12 and 16 would have tried sniffing solvents. It is difficult to quantify, but surveys suggest that around 10 per cent of secondary school children would have tried solvents at least once. VSA is often sporadic and isolated to hot spots or areas where it is hardly done.

VSA is more common in Scotland for example where up to a fifth of 14 and 15 year old shave sniffed or 'biffed' glue or other solvents. Solvents are the only drug where girls not only match boys, but sometimes outnumber them in taking the drug (usually around the age of 13 years). Only a minority will go on to become regular users, often sniffing alone to escape from personal problems.

The rise of ecstasy use has tended to relegate solvent use to the sidelines as far as the media is concerned and it may well be that sniffing solvents is less of a craze than it was a few years ago. However, between 70 and 100 young people are still dying from solvent sniffing every year; some of these fatalities will be first time sniffers.

History

Use of solvent type products to achieve intoxication is not new. In the late 19th century America and England there were crazes for nitrous oxide (laughing gas) and ether sniffing, especially at parties for the upper classes and medical students. Sniffing of anaesthetic gases by the medical profession and of petrol among soldiers has also been reported in the past.

The modern day phenomenon of solvent sniffing by young people was first reported in America in the 1950s. The first case of solvent sniffing in the UK was reported in 1962, but only in late seventies did the incidence of sniffing increase substantially.

In the 1970s and 80s the concern focused on the sniffing of glue but more recently sniffing of aerosols and other products has become much more common. Some commentators have suggested that this trend from glue to gas has been one of the effects of the campaign to encourage shopkeepers to move glue out of the reach of young people on the shelves - and that this has led youngsters sniffing more dangerous products.

The law

There are two laws covering the sale of volatile substances. The Intoxicating Substances Supply Act 1985, applying to England and Wales (Northern Ireland has similar legislation), makes it an offence for a person to supply or offer to supply to someone under the age of 18 a substance (other than a controlled drug) 'if he knows or has reasonable cause to believe that the substance or its fumes are likely to be inhaled for the purpose of causing intoxication'.

This Act is primarily aimed at irresponsible retailers, but it is difficult to prove that a shopkeeper knew the substances would be sniffed (unless a 'sniffing kit' - a small quantity of glue plus plastic bag as one item - is sold). Thus, only relatively few prosecutions, 90 resulting in 53 convictions as of 1997, have been brought under this Act.

Scottish common law provides for a similar offence of 'recklessly' selling solvents to children knowing they are going to inhale them.

An amendment to the Consumer Protection Act (The Cigarette Lighter Refill (Safety) Regulations 1999) made it an offence to 'supply any cigarette lighter refill canister containing butane or a substance with butane as a constituent part to any person under the age of eighteen years.'

This means that shopkeepers must not sell butane gas lighter refills to an under-18-year-old; even if they claim they want it to refill their cigarette lighter. This law covers the whole of the UK.

Some young people who have used solvents in public have offended against a variety of laws and local by-laws concerned with unruly, offensive, alarming or intoxicating behaviour or breach of the peace.

Effects/risks

Inhaled solvent vapours are absorbed through the lungs and rapidly reach the brain. Breathing and heart rate slow down and repeated or deeper inhalation leads to feelings similar to being drunk with loss of co-ordination and disorientation. In some cases users momentarily lose consciousness but will normally come round quickly with no lasting damage. Users report visual distortions and peculiarities similar to hallucinations.

The effects are short lived and usually less than 45 minutes without a repeat dose. As the effects wear off users often feel tired and drowsy and may experience a hangover.

Accidental death or injury can happen especially if youngsters are sniffing in an unsafe environment such as a canal or river bank, on a roof or near a busy road or train line. Sniffing to the point of becoming unconscious also risks death through choking on vomit. If the method of use obstructs breathing (such as sniffing with a plastic bag over the head) death from suffocation may result.

Some solvents (such as an aerosols and cleaning fluids) sensitise the heart to the effects of exertion and can lead to heart failure, especially if the user is running around. Gases in aerosols and lighter fuel refills squirted directly into the mouth can freeze the airways and lead to death through suffocation.

Very long term heavy use of solvents can damage the brain, kidneys and liver but this is very rare and more likely in industrial work where people work every day in environments where solvents are used.

Tolerance can develop with regular use so more is needed to get the same effect. Whilst physical dependence is not a problem psychological dependence on the effects of solvents occurs with a small minority of users. These youngsters may come to rely on solvents to deal with unhappiness and underlying personal, family or social problems. They often sniff alone rather than in a group with friends.

Long term regular use may also lead to people becoming very tired, forgetful and not being able to concentrate. Weight loss, depression and interference with kidney and liver functions can occur but these tend to clear up once sniffing stops.

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Other Sources of information

Local organisations that offer Assessment & Treatment options for people with addictions:		National organisations that offer treatment, advice, information & support for people with addictions:
EDAS – Mental Health and Alcohol & Substance Misuse Support in Poole Tel 01202 735777 hello@edasuk.org www.edasuk.org **EDAS/REACH YP –** Free and confidential drug and alcohol service for under 25s who live in the Borough of Poole and County of Dorset Tel 0800 0434656 www.edasuk.org/yp **WE ARE WITH YOU** Tel 01202558855 www.wearewithyou.org.uk **EDP** Tel 01305 571264 info@edp.org.uk		**ALCOHOL CHANGE** Tel 020 3907 8480 www.alcoholchange.org.uk **FRANK** Tel 0300 1236600 Text 82111 www.talktofrank.com

Contact us: Helpline 01202 735777 (Weekdays 8:30am to 4:00m, 24-hour answer phone)
Email: hello@edasuk.org
EDAS Head Office - 54A Ashley Road, Parkstone, Poole BH14 9BN

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