

# What are volatile substances?

Volatile substances are household and workplace chemicals that people misuse to become intoxicated. Inhaling volatile substances can result in a decreased rate of breathing, decreased heart rate, and loss of consciousness, possibly leading to coma or death.

## Types of volatile substances

- > Solvents – liquid or semi-solid solvents that vaporise at room temperature (glues, petrol)
- > Aerosols – solvents and propellant gases (as found in spray paints, deodorant, hair spray)
- > Gases – butane, propane and anaesthetic gases (nitrous oxide)
- > Nitrites – vasodilators and muscle relaxants (amyl and butyl).

## Effects

### During use

The effects felt during use can be both desired and undesired. For most people who use volatile substances, the desired effects are exhilaration and increased self confidence. The effects experienced largely depend on the amount used and on the individual person. Hallucinations caused by volatile substances can be frightening and traumatic.

### Harmful effects

In small amounts, harmful effects include:

- > dizziness
- > nausea (feeling sick)
- > dullness of senses (brain fog)
- > disorientation
- > loss of self control
- > blurred vision
- > hallucinations (seeing, hearing or feelings things that don't exist).

As well as the above effects, harmful effects of moderate amounts can include:

- > drowsiness
- > lack of muscle coordination
- > slurred speech (speech that is difficult to understand).

## Overdose - what to look out for

Someone has experienced an overdose if they suffer a medical emergency as a result of accidentally or intentionally using a larger amount of a drug than normal. Noticeable signs you or someone else is having an overdose can include:

- > unconsciousness
- > fever
- > confusion
- > seizures
- > heart failure (may result in death) - particularly if a user is startled, stressed or exercises after inhaling.

If someone is experiencing any of the above signs, **phone 000** immediately for medical attention. Police will not attend unless the ambulance officers call for help or a death occurs.

## Effects from long-term use

Volatile substances can cause brain damage and serious physical health problems. Long-term use may lead to:

- > short-term memory loss, confusion, depression, irritability, hostility, learning problems, fatigue
- > trembling, loss of control of fine movements, slowed reaction time, dizziness
- > damage to the heart, lungs, liver and kidneys
- > chronic headaches, sinusitis, nosebleeds
- > red watery eyes; cough; runny nose; spots around the mouth and nose
- > indigestion and stomach ulcers.

People who use volatile substances in the longer term can become self-absorbed and have difficulty communicating, leading to social isolation and significant psychological and social problems.

## Duration

Effects of volatile substances come on quickly because they enter the bloodstream from the lungs instead of the stomach. Effects last between one and five minutes and are usually over within 30 to 60 minutes of a session of use.

## Dependence

People who regularly inhale volatile substances may quickly develop tolerance and become dependent.

Using daily or almost every day over a period of time leads to physical and psychological changes to the body.

The body adapts or 'gets used to' having a drug on a regular basis. This is called tolerance. People who are tolerant need more of the drug to achieve the same effects, but increasing the dose also increases the likelihood of unpleasant effects.

The key feature of dependence is a loss of control over use. People who are dependent spend a lot of time thinking about drugs, obtaining and using drugs, and recovering from the effects. They find it difficult to reduce or stop drug use, even when they are aware of problems related to their drug use.

## Withdrawal

It is rare for withdrawal symptoms to occur when a person stops using volatile substances. People who use volatile substances regularly may experience headaches, muscular cramps and abdominal pain.

## Volatiles substances and the law

It is illegal to sell or give a volatile solvent to another person if you suspect or have reasonable grounds to suspect that the person:

- > intends to inhale the solvent
- > intends to give or sell the solvent to a further person for inhalation by that further person.

Under the section 47 of the *Road Traffic Act 1961*, it is an offence to drive or attempt to drive a motor vehicle under the influence of a drug. Drugs in your system make driving extremely dangerous because they impair coordination, reduce reaction time, and affect your vision and ability to judge distance and speed.

For more information about volatile substances and the law, visit [www.sahealth.sa.gov.au](http://www.sahealth.sa.gov.au) > Health topics > Legal matters > Illicit drug laws.

## Further information

Risks of using drugs - visit [www.sahealth.sa.gov.au](http://www.sahealth.sa.gov.au) > Healthy Living > Is your health at risk? > The risks of using drugs.

Phone the Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS) on 1300 13 1340 between 8.30am and 10pm for confidential telephone counselling, information and referral.

## For more information

**Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS)**  
**Phone: 1300 13 1340**  
**Confidential telephone counselling and information available between 8.30am and 10pm every day.**

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