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**United Nations International Drug Control Programme (UNDCP)  
Caribbean Regional Office**

## Fact Sheet 2002

## Inhalant/Solvent Use in the Caribbean



## What are inhalants/solvents?

Inhalants are breathable chemical vapours that produce mind-altering effects. They are composed of the solvents, gases and nitrites that are found in numerous household products such as gasoline, hairspray, spray deodorant, spray paint, liquid paper, paint thinner, rubber cement, varnish, glue, nail polish remover and various aerosol products.

## Short-term effects

Short-term effects of inhalant/solvent use include red, glassy or watery eyes, slurred speech, disorientation, general drunken appearance, loss of appetite, loss of orientation, an inflamed nose, nosebleeds, and/or a chemical odour on the body or clothes.

In contrast to many other drugs, inhalant use may very quickly result in the most severe consequence – death. Known as the “sudden sniffing death syndrome,” this tragic result occurs when an inhalant reacts with natural adrenaline-like substances in the body to cause heart failure or when the substance freezes airways, causing death through suffocation.

## Long-term effects

Long-term abuse of inhalants can cause weight loss, skin problems, bronchitis, muscle fatigue, memory impairment, mood swings and loss of concentration. Repeated sniffing of strong vapors over a number of years can cause permanent damage to the nervous system. In addition, long-term abuse of certain inhalants can damage the liver, kidneys, blood, and bone marrow. Glue and paint thinner sniffing in particular produce kidney abnormalities, while the solvents toluene and trichloroethylene cause liver damage.

## Mode of administration

Inhalant vapors can be sniffed or sucked in directly from an open container or aerosol, or from a rag soaked in the substance and held to the face. Alternatively, the open container, substance or soaked rag can be placed in and inhaled from a paper or plastic bag. Some sniffers strengthen the effect by sniffing from inside a plastic bag placed over the head. This is very dangerous because the user may suffocate and become unconscious or even die.

## Demand of inhalants and solvents in the Caribbean

Although no deaths due to inhalant use have been officially reported in the Caribbean, at least eight countries report the abuse of inhalants in their country. In the Dominican Republic 12.5% of students between the ages of 12 to 20 reported using inhalants at least once in their lives. Students between 11 to 17 years of age in Barbados reported an 11% lifetime usage rate and youth between 12 and 19 years of age in Belize City reported a 1.8% rate of lifetime usage. In addition, a study from St. Lucia shows that among 13-15 year olds on the island, 2.6% of them abuse inhalants monthly or more frequently.

Currently, at least two countries in the Caribbean have expressed concern about an increase in inhalant use among young people. The number of 7th graders in the Cayman Islands using inhalants increased from 6.8% in 1998 to 11.4% in 2000. Haiti provided another distressing statistic in 2000, stating that almost 16% of young people at risk (those living on the streets or in instable family environments) reported current abuse of inhalants.

## What can be done?

### Supply of Inhalants/Solvents

- ◆ Retailer interventions: For example, laws that make 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.

### Parent & Family Support

- ◆ Targeted Education (eg booklet Solvent Sniffing information for parents)
- ◆ Support for families of solvent abusers

### Drug Education

- ◆ Use the term 'poison' rather than 'drug' when describing solvents
- ◆ Training health & welfare workers

### Schools

- ◆ Provide resources, training & support to student services staff regarding solvent sniffing and well-targeted interventions rather than whole of school approach to specific solvent issues.
- ◆ Don't pay special attention to solvents - discuss in the context of general intoxication or the management of poisons.

## More research needed

More research is needed to examine the magnitude of inhalant/solvent use among young people in general and among young vulnerable populations such as street children.

## Summary

While the statistics for the region are not complete, there is evidence that suggests some Caribbean youth are abusing solvents and other industrially produced chemical inhalants as a means of intoxication. And while sniffing, also known as huffing, is not confirmed to be widespread in the region, there is cause for concern.