

Sniffing your life away

Heroin, cocaine, ecstasy and cannabis: the four most common and popular drugs we constantly hear about. But what about inhalants – one of the most widely used substances by Maltese adolescents? Are we really aware of the dangers such legal substances are inflicting on the younger generation?

What are inhalants?

Inhalants are generally products containing chemicals, which have mind-altering effects when inhaled. These effects include feelings of euphoria, disorientation, drowsiness and agitation (<http://www.nida.nih.gov/DrugPages/Inhalants.html>). These products are usually in the form of gases or solvents such as lighter fluid, gasoline, paint thinner, nail polish, glue, felt tip markers, cleaning products, and hair sprays amongst others.

Who abuses Inhalants?

Inhalants are readily available substances. This makes it easier for young children and adolescents to acquire and make use of. They are cheap to acquire and can be found anywhere, even at home or school. Considering their young age and level of maturity, children and adolescents more often than not, do not realise the real danger of inhalants. Thus, curiosity and peer pressure take over, and experimentation starts.

Unfortunately, children and adolescents start sniffing such substances to emulate their already abusing friends, siblings or older children in their neighbourhood or schools. However there are also instances when the child or adolescent, discovers the psychoactive effects of a household product by accident.

Typical inhalant users are between the ages of nine and seventeen. In fact, the results of the latest International Report on the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD) carried out in 2007 shows a high rise of inhalant use amongst secondary school students. 16% of the participating Maltese students claimed making life time use of inhalants, one of the highest percentages obtained from all the 35 participating countries in this study. This is much higher than the ESPAD average of 9%. 0.9% of the Maltese 15-16 year old participants claimed they have started experimenting with inhalants at the tender age of 9 years.

Harmful Consequences

The “high” feelings caused by inhalants are felt after a few minutes and can last for up to one hour. As the human body develops tolerance for the substance, the person feels the need to sniff more frequently. Nearly all inhalants are depressants and slow the body's functions. Sniffing small amounts can make the person feel slightly stimulated or excited.

When the vapours are inhaled, they are first absorbed through the lungs; then they enter the bloodstream from where the chemicals then travel to the brain and other tissues throughout the body.

There are two types of effects produced by inhalants, the immediate and long term effects.

Immediate Effects:

- Relaxation
- Slurred speech
- Euphoria
- Hallucinations
- Drowsiness
- Dizziness
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Severe hangover

Long term use of inhalants can cause:

- Short term memory loss
- Concentration problems
- Visual disturbances
- Fatigue
- Emotional instability
- Limb spasms
- Loss of sense of smell
- Psychosis
- Nose-bleeds
- Amnesia
- Psychological addiction

Repeated sniffing may cause permanent damage to the nervous system, liver, lungs, brain, kidneys, blood cells and bone marrow and can ultimately lead to death.

Inhalant abuse can also lead to sudden death. This syndrome is widely known as "sudden sniffing death". Just one session of prolonged inhalant use can lead the heart to beat more frequently and unevenly thus leading to a cardiac arrest. Inhaling can also lead to asphyxiation, suffocation, choking and Pulmonary oedema (fluid in the lungs) which also lead to an immediate fatality. This can happen to anyone, even a young healthy person. (http://www.drugabuse.gov/NIDA_Notes/NNVol15N6/tearoff.html).

Prevention Tips

Many people are not aware of inhalants and the risks they bring. Unfortunately, the majority of parents are worried about drug abuse but they don't realize that there are various products in their own home which their children can abuse of. (<http://family.samhsa.gov/talk/inhalants.aspx>).

It is important that when parents discuss the issue of drug abuse with their children, they also mention inhalants. Since inhalants are found in common products, it would be easier for parents to start a conversation about them. Ideal moments for such discussions can be while cooking, cleaning, using cosmetics or filling the car with fuel. Parents should also be careful of where to store such products, as well as of

unintentionally giving ideas to their children about inhalants that arouse their children's curiosity about these substances.

Parents should be aware that household products are not 100% safe and contain harmful chemicals. They might also have the wrong perception that since these products are used everyday, they are not harmful.

Shop owners can also keep an eye open here. When they notice the same children or adolescents, frequently buying items that can be inhaled, such as gas lighters and butane cans; they should have the moral responsibility of either speaking to their parents or else refusing to sell them these items.

Early recognition of inhalant abuse is very important. Signs include chemical odors on the breath or clothes, paint or other stains on skin or clothes, slurred speech and drunk or disoriented appearance, nausea or lack of appetite, and inattentiveness and lack of coordination.

A strong parent-child relationship is also important. Children and adolescents should be aware that their parents are always there to help, in any circumstance. Parents should also seek help, in cases where their children have emotional problems. There is nothing wrong with counselling, it serves to strengthen the parent-child relationship. Another tip is to get to know your children's friends. As mentioned earlier in this article, peer pressure plays a strong part in substance abuse.

Secondary School Programmes by Agenzija Sedqa

Agenzija Sedqa provides a series of preventive programmes in secondary schools to strengthen the curriculum in the areas related to addiction and substance abuse. This is done through age-appropriate set lectures, focusing on areas such as addiction, gambling, substance abuse, juvenile delinquency and technological addictions. Considering that Form 3 students are the most vulnerable in relation to inhalant abuse, sessions carried out with these students specifically include information about inhalants.

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Amanda Mizzi – Social Marketing and Communications Executive, Foundation for Social Welfare Services

Rita Cortis – Prevention Executive, Agenzija Sedqa

For more information about Agenzija Sedqa visit www.sedqa.gov.mt. Agenzija Sedqa forms part of the Foundation for Social Welfare Services which incorporates Agenzija Appogg (www.appogg.gov.mt) and Agenzija Sapport (www.sapport.gov.mt).