



A WHIFF OF DANGER: TEENS USE INHALANTS TO GET HIGH

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Richard Laliberte | 2/8/2007 10:02:46 AM

More kids than ever are getting high by sniffing ordinary household products like hair spray, room freshener and deodorant. And the consequences can be deadly.

Katelyne Fries first tried huffing in 2004, when she was 14 and living in Fort Drum, New York, an army community where her stepfather was stationed. She was hanging out with friends on an idle summer afternoon when one of them came out of his parents' room holding an aerosol can of dust cleaner. "You want to see something cool?" he asked. He put the nozzle in his mouth and took a quick hit, then swooned and started talking in a strange, low voice. "He sounded like Darth Vader," Katelyne says. "We couldn't stop laughing." The other kids followed suit, each experiencing an intense head rush after inhaling the toxic gas. "My vision started to go black and I felt really light-headed," she recalls. "Everyone was asking, 'Dude, are you okay?' We kept laughing and passing the can."



To Katelyne it was just harmless horsing around. They were using a familiar household product, the effects faded quickly and everyone seemed okay afterward. Over the summer she huffed with friends a few more times. But a year later she came across a forwarded e-mail circulating on the

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Internet in which an Ohio police officer described how inhaling killed his son so suddenly that the teen was found sitting up in bed with a straw attached to an aerosol can still dangling from his mouth. "That was a major shock," says Katelyne. "I thought that with inhalants there were no consequences."

Unlike a lot of stories on the Internet, this one was true. Jeff Williams, a police sergeant in East Cleveland, was on duty at 5:30 a.m. on March 2, 2005, when he learned the sheriff's department had been called to his own home.

"When I got there I saw four sheriff's cars and no ambulance," he recalls. "I knew that wasn't a good sign." His wife, Kathy, had gone to rouse their 14-year-old, Kyle, when he didn't get out of bed for school. He had died around midnight from sudden sniffing death syndrome, a condition in which the heart starts to beat erratically, then stops altogether, after inhaling chemicals.

Substance abuse was the last thing Williams thought would harm his son. He's experienced in drug enforcement, Kathy is a nurse, and the family pet is a retired police dog trained to find illicit drugs. "You can't get drugs into our house without someone knowing—at least that's what I thought," he says. "Inhalants were completely off the radar." Later, Williams would learn that one of Kyle's friends had told him about inhalants on the bus ride home from school about two weeks earlier. "He told Kyle it's just compressed air," Williams says, "and that it can't hurt you."



David Manlove died while abusing inhalants.

HOW TO KEEP YOUR KIDS FROM HUFFING

Educate early. Teach kids between ages 6 and 11 to think of toxic household products as poisons. Emphasize the body's need for oxygen and explain how many items produce gases or fumes that can make you sick.

If your children help with cleaning or other chores involving potentially dangerous products, read to them the label warnings and directions, make sure there's proper ventilation and supervise them

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carefully.

Discuss the dangers, but not details. Before kids enter middle school, talk with them about how people abuse household inhalants. Explain that these products can be just as dangerous as alcohol and drugs, and that anyone who says they're harmless is wrong. Focus on the risks, and avoid mentioning specific items so you don't give your child any ideas.

Talk, don't scold. Ask your kid what he or she knows about inhalants with nonjudgmental questions ("I hear a lot of kids these days are trying inhalants; do you know of anyone who's doing that?"). "You want to invite a conversation, which makes kids more likely to listen to you," says Pasierb. "When you lecture and say things like 'If you huff inhalants, you'll be in big trouble,' kids will tune you out." If you suspect your child is huffing, ask about it directly. If your child won't discuss it, seek counseling right away.

Millions of adolescents are under the same dangerous illusion. Some 4.7 million teenagers have used inhalants at one time or another, according to the Partnership for a Drug-Free America. And a 2006 government survey shows that each year some 598,000 kids between ages 12 and 17 try them for the first time. Inhalants are most popular among seventh- and eighth-graders, more so than marijuana; in fact, they're far more available than drugs most parents worry about, such as cocaine. A 2006 survey by the Alliance for Consumer Education (ACE) and the Partnership found that compared with five years ago, there are 19% fewer teens who believe inhalants can kill. That's an alarming shift, especially given the fact that public education helped bring inhalant abuse down after a peak in 1995. Says Steve Pasierb, president and CEO of the Partnership for a Drug-Free America: "History is repeating itself."

No one knows how many [teens die from inhalants annually](#) — the chemicals typically don't show up on standard drug tests, hospitals aren't on the lookout for them, and deaths are often attributed to something that inhalant abuse caused, like a car crash or drowning. But the anecdotal evidence is chilling. "Kids are looking for that dizzy, fuzzy feeling and are coming to inhalants naively," says Pasierb. "We hear every day of wonderful kids who make a bad decision and pay with their lives."

The potential for abuse is all around: in basements, garages, medicine chests, kitchen cabinets, office drawers. There are thousands of products that can be used to get high—including cleaning and degreasing agents, nail polish remover, paints and thinners, lighter fluid, fuel, gasoline, cooking sprays, deodorants and air fresheners. Kids typically snort fumes from containers or spray aerosols directly into their noses or mouths. Other techniques include huffing (soaking rags in inhalants and pressing them to the mouth) and bagging (inhaling fumes from products sprayed into plastic or paper bags).

The key intoxicants are the solvents that keep ingredients dissolved, such as toluene ("tolly" to abusers), acetone and trichloroethane. Quickly absorbed through the lungs and into the bloodstream, they dissolve the fats that surround brain and nerve cells and disrupt electrical signals between neurons, causing euphoria but also acting as an alcohol-like depressant. "It's like becoming falling-down drunk almost instantly," says Robert Balster, Ph.D., director of the Institute for Drug and Alcohol Studies at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond. The high wears off in 30 to 60 seconds, but repeated abuse can permanently impair coordination and memory, says Alvin C. Bronstein, M.D., medical director of the Rocky Mountain Poison Center in Denver, Colorado. And when the liver breaks down the solvents, the chemical by-products can make it harder to filter toxins. Deaths occur when scrambled nerve transmissions interrupt cardiac signals and stop the heart. Inhalants displace air in the lungs, depriving the body of oxygen. As a result, kids who take repeated hits sometimes asphyxiate. Others become sick to their stomachs and are so intoxicated they choke on their vomit. Abusers who inhale from a bag can pass out, face still in the bag, and die from an overdose.

For many teens, inhalants are a passing phase; compared with other drugs, the high is too brief, and sniffing simply isn't all that cool. But they're often a stepping stone to other drugs, especially marijuana. One in four adolescents using inhalants for the first time have never indulged in anything else — not even alcohol or cigarettes. And the peer pressure is intense. "In middle school and early high school, kids don't sell each other on doing drugs, but on being friends," says Peter Sheras, Ph.D., a psychology professor at the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education in Charlottesville, and author of *I Can't Believe You Went Through My Stuff!* (Fireside). Since kids learn the techniques from others, he adds, "the first time" almost always happens in a group setting. What's more, the Internet is further stoking the trend: Kids can learn all about inhalants online. One popular 84-second home video that was on YouTube.com shows a teen couple taking hits from spray cans while parked in the driveway of a suburban home. Their heads loll, the boy stumbles out of the car and collapses while the pair laughs — as does the girl behind-the-scenes who's holding the camera.

KNOW THE WARNING SIGNS

Inhalant abuse is easy to hide, so look out for the following red flags:

- ***Products in odd places**, such as nail polish remover in your son's room or butane lighters in the house when no one smokes
 - ***Odd-smelling breath** (from huffing through the mouth)
 - ***Rags, clothing or empty product containers** stashed in out-of-the-way places like closets or under the bed
 - ***A dazed look**, glassy eyes, slurred speech or clumsiness (signs of recent intoxication)
 - ***Empty product containers** that you could have sworn were full the last time you saw them
 - ***Unexplained paint** smudges on the face, lips, nose or fingers
 - ***Restlessness**, anxiety, flying off the handle at odd times, which could indicate repeated use
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The increase in inhalant abuse also stems in part from the fact that adults tend to underestimate the threat to their children. Only 5% of parents think their kids have tried inhalants, when in fact one out of four adolescents has abused a household product by eighth grade. Katelyne's mother, Lynne Hanson, never suspected her daughter was doing inhalants and didn't learn of it until Katelyne confided in her. "I hadn't given it a thought," Hanson says. "I don't want to sound snobby, but I didn't believe a child of mine would get involved with something like that." And while 87% of parents say they talk to their kids about cigarettes, alcohol and drugs, only 47% mention inhalants. Nor are the risks routinely addressed at schools, since some drug prevention organizations advocate avoiding the topic for fear of introducing kids to the idea that they can get high from common household products.

But many experts advise that you sit your children down and have a frank discussion with them about inhalants—and that you warn them continually of the risks. Kids whose parents do this are half as likely to try them, according to ACE. "You don't have to be an expert," says Pasierb. "Just stick to the message that these are dangerous chemicals that shouldn't be ingested in any way."

Katelyne got the message loud and clear. The news of Kyle Williams' death, she says, "knocked me out of my stupid mode" and prompted her to read up on inhalants. She immediately told friends to quit and wrote an article about inhalant abuse for her school paper. "I used to think there was nothing wrong with doing inhalants," Katelyne says. "Now I know better. They're really drugs, and they can kill."

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