



commission  
for children  
and young people

# Volatile substance misuse - frequently asked questions

## What is volatile substance misuse?

Volatile substance misuse is the deliberate inhalation of gas or fumes released from a solvent at room temperature, for the purpose of intoxication or 'getting high'.

Volatile substance misuse (VSM) is also known as 'inhaling', 'chroming', 'sniffing' or 'huffing'.

## What are volatile substances?

'Volatile substances' or 'inhalants' include a broad range of common products containing volatile substances such as toluene and hydrocarbons which produce chemical vapours at room temperature.

Products containing volatile substances include:

- aerosols - spray paint (one of the most commonly used products), hair spray, air freshener, deodorant, fabric protector
- adhesives - model aeroplane glue, rubber cement, household glue
- solvents and gases - nail polish remover, paint thinner, correction fluid and thinner, toxic markers, pure toluene, cigarette lighter fluid, petrol, carburettor cleaner, octane booster, nitrous oxide, butane, propane, helium
- cleaning agents - dry cleaning fluid, stain remover, degreasers
- food products - vegetable cooking spray, dessert topping spray (whipped cream).

## Who misuses volatile substances?

VSM is prevalent among young people aged between 6 and 18. Most are experimental users, who only do it once or twice out of curiosity, although some do it in groups as a social activity. A few young people are chronic users.

Some adults also misuse volatile substances.

## How can you tell if someone has been misusing volatile substances?

Some of the signs to look for include:

- the smell of vapour on their clothes or breath
- a rash or sore spots around their mouth
- red, watering eyes and a runny nose
- a drunk appearance, or if someone is falling over
- paint stains around the mouth, skin or on the clothes
- confusion or disorientation<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Victorian Government, *Solvents: Frequently Asked Questions*

### **Is volatile substance misuse dangerous?**

Yes, extremely. Volatile substance misuse can result in permanent physical or mental damage, or even death as a result of suffocation, asphyxiation, choking or injury. Sudden Sniffing Death Syndrome (SSDS) can occur if a person does strenuous exercise or has a sudden fright immediately after sniffing.

Long term effects of VSM include:

- heart, liver and kidney damage
- hearing loss
- damage to the central nervous system and brain
- bone marrow damage
- anaemia
- weight loss
- sores around the mouth and nose
- sneezing, coughing and a runny nose
- nosebleeds
- blood oxygen depletion.

### **Is volatile substance misuse illegal in Queensland?**

No. The misuse of volatile substances is not illegal in Queensland, nor is the sale of products containing volatile substances to minors.

However, the dangers associated with VSM are sufficient reason for action to address it.

### **What laws are in place in Queensland to deal with VSM?**

Under Queensland's *Child Protection Act 1999*, a police officer may take a child under the age of 12 who is at risk of harm to a safe place. This could be applied to a young person who has been misusing volatile substances.

The *Police Powers and Responsibilities Act 2000* allows police to confiscate volatile substances misused or reasonably suspected of being misused for the purposes of inhalation.

### **How can we effectively address VSM?**

Volatile substance misuse is a complex issue. To address it, communities must identify:

- what volatile substances are being misused?
- who is misusing volatile substances?
- how are volatile substances being obtained?
- where is the misuse of volatile substances taking place?
- when is it taking place, and most importantly,
- why are young people misusing volatile substances?

Retailers can play an important role in addressing the problem of VSM by limiting access to products containing volatile substances.



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