

Inhalant Misuse

Understanding the risks, the signs and where to get help

Inhalant misuse involves deliberately breathing in volatile substances or gases for their psychoactive effects. Some of these substances are found in ordinary household, workplace or industrial products, which can make the danger easy to underestimate. The effects can begin quickly and may include dizziness, disinhibition, confusion, poor coordination or altered awareness. Serious harm can also occur suddenly, including on an occasion when a person has not previously experienced a major problem.

Why inhalants can be especially unpredictable

Different inhaled substances affect the body in different ways, but risks can include reduced oxygen, abnormal heart rhythms, loss of consciousness, seizures, aspiration, accidents and injury. Intoxication may impair judgement and coordination very quickly. The concentration inhaled, ventilation, underlying health, other substances and the specific chemical involved all affect risk, and the actual exposure may be difficult to judge.

Signs that may suggest a problem

During or soon after use Dizziness, slurred speech, poor balance, confusion, nausea, headache, unusual drowsiness or reduced awareness.	Behaviour & routine Repeated intoxication, secrecy, unexplained absences, declining responsibilities or increasingly organising time around opportunities to use.
Thinking & mood Memory or concentration problems, irritability, low mood, emotional changes or difficulties functioning without the altered state.	Physical concerns Breathing problems, fainting, chest symptoms, repeated headaches, neurological symptoms or injuries occurring while intoxicated.

Sudden serious harm

Inhalant-related emergencies can develop rapidly. Call 999 if someone is unconscious or cannot be woken, has severe breathing difficulty, has a seizure, collapses, has severe chest symptoms, becomes dangerously confused, or you suspect a serious poisoning. Move away from an ongoing environmental exposure only if it is safe to do so; do not place yourself at risk by entering a contaminated or poorly ventilated space.

Brain, heart and organ effects

Repeated exposure to some inhalants can affect the brain and nervous system, including memory, attention, movement and coordination. Depending on the substance, there may also be effects on the heart, liver, kidneys, blood or other organs. Because 'inhalants' covers many chemicals, there is no single long-term risk profile. Persistent neurological, breathing, cardiac or other physical symptoms need medical assessment with honest information about possible exposure.

Dependence and the need underneath use

Some people develop a repeated pattern of inhalant use with cravings, loss of control and continued use despite harm. For others, the behaviour may be closely connected with distress, boredom, trauma, social pressure, impulsivity or the wish to escape quickly from difficult feelings. Treatment should explore the function of the behaviour rather than assuming that information about risk alone will make it stop.

If you are worried about a young person

Avoid turning the first conversation into an interrogation. Describe what you have noticed, ask what is happening, and take physical symptoms seriously. Products that appear ordinary can still be dangerous when deliberately inhaled. If there is evidence of intoxication, collapse, breathing difficulty or poisoning, prioritise medical help. Ongoing concerns can be discussed with a GP, safeguarding professional or local drug and alcohol service.

A first reflection

Ask: **What happens just before I want to use? What feeling or state am I trying to change? What does inhaling give me for those few minutes? What happens afterwards? Who could help with the problem underneath it?** Understanding the pattern can turn an apparently impulsive behaviour into something that can be worked with.

Inhalant Misuse - Help, Safety and Recovery

Immediate safety, longer-term support and UK routes to help

Where to get help in the UK

GP	A GP can assess ongoing physical or mental-health symptoms and help arrange further investigation or specialist drug support where needed.
Local drug & alcohol service	Community services can support inhalant and volatile-substance misuse alongside other drug problems. Many accept self-referrals and can work with wider emotional and practical needs.
FRANK	Confidential UK drug information and advice. Helpline: 0300 123 6600 ; text 82111 . FRANK also provides information about local support.
UK SMART Recovery	Free peer-support meetings using practical tools for motivation, managing urges and changing repeated behaviour.
Narcotics Anonymous UK	Peer-led recovery fellowship with in-person and online meetings. Helpline: 0300 999 1212 .
Urgent / emergency help	Call 999 for unconsciousness, severe breathing problems, seizure, collapse, severe chest symptoms or suspected serious poisoning. NHS 111 can provide urgent medical advice where available.

What recovery may need to include

Recovery can involve changing access and routines, managing urges, rebuilding sleep and daily structure, and finding safer ways to respond to distress or boredom. Where use is linked with trauma, neurodivergence, social exclusion, family difficulties or mental-health symptoms, those areas may need their own support. If physical symptoms are present, psychological recovery work should sit alongside appropriate medical assessment rather than replacing it.

A trigger - need - alternative exercise

Write down one recent episode using three headings. **Trigger:** what was happening immediately beforehand? **Need:** what did you want to feel more of or less of? **Alternative:** what could change the same moment without inhalant use? The alternative might be leaving a situation, sensory regulation, contacting somebody, movement, distraction, rest or professional support. Aim for something realistic, not idealised.

Supporting somebody else

Talk at a time when the person is sober and physically stable. Focus on observable changes and concern rather than shame. Encourage professional help and take breathing, cardiac or neurological symptoms seriously. Keep boundaries around money, driving, children and your own safety. Do not expose yourself to fumes or enter an unsafe environment in an attempt to rescue someone; call emergency services and follow their instructions.

One book to explore

Overcoming Your Alcohol or Drug Problem: Effective Recovery Strategies - Dennis C. Daley and G. Alan Marlatt. There are fewer accessible recovery books focused specifically on inhalant misuse, so I have chosen a broader evidence-informed resource. Its work on triggers, urges, consequences and relapse prevention can help someone understand the behavioural cycle around inhalants. I would use it alongside substance-specific medical information because the acute and long-term physical risks of inhaled chemicals need their own attention.

A message from Maggie

Something being easy to find does not mean it is safe to misuse. Inhalants can become part of a very fast escape from feelings, pressure or boredom, and that speed can make it difficult to notice how much risk has entered the picture. If this is happening to you or someone you care about, start with what is happening rather than with blame. Physical safety matters, but so does understanding what the person has been trying to get away from or change inside themselves.

Clinical note

This guide is educational and does not replace individual medical assessment. Inhalants include many different volatile substances and gases with different toxic effects. Suspected serious poisoning, unconsciousness, seizure, breathing difficulty or collapse requires emergency help. Persistent neurological, cardiac, respiratory or other symptoms require assessment. Service details can change and should be checked before publication.