

# FRANK

## gases, glues and aerosols

IS YOUR CHILD AT RISK?

WHAT EVERY PARENT NEEDS TO KNOW



# about volatile substance abuse

Volatile substance abuse or VSA is when someone deliberately breathes in gases, aerosols or the fumes from glue and other solvents to get 'high'. It is also referred to as 'sniffing'.

VSA often takes place in the home, where people have easy access to the household product they are abusing. They breathe in substances from a cloth, sleeve or plastic bag. If they are using gas, they might spray it straight into the back of their throat.

Worryingly, young people aged 11-16 are abusing gases, glues and aerosols.

**But most young people do not experiment with or use volatile substances.**

## Want to know more?

### Use this leaflet to find out about:

- 01 what products can be inhaled?
- 02 who is a typical user?
- 03 why do young people try volatile substances?
- 04 what are the effects?
- 06 what are the dangers?
- 08 what signs should you look for?
- 10 how can you protect your child?
- 11 what if your child tries VSA?
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## VSA can kill

Users can never know what effects gases, glues and aerosols will have or how strong they are. So sniffing is dangerous. It kills more young people aged 10-16 than any illegal drug. It can kill a user on their first attempt – and it can kill instantly.

## Make sure your child is safe

See pages 10-13 for advice on making them aware of the dangers of abusing gases, glues and aerosols.

# what products can be inhaled?

## What products do users sniff?

- > gas lighter refills
- > aerosols – e.g. hairspray, deodorants, air fresheners
- > nail varnish and varnish remover
- > some paints
- > glues in tins or tubes
- > dry-cleaning fluid
- > plaster remover
- > some shoe and metal polish
- > old halon fire extinguishers (not new)
- > petrol and petroleum products
- > thinners and paint removers

Latest published figures show 47 VSA deaths in England with half of these occurring at home

## VSA is not against the law

But its effects on a young person's behaviour can get them into trouble with the police.

It is illegal for shopkeepers to sell substances to young people if they think that they might inhale them. It is also illegal to sell gas lighter refills to people under the age of 18.



# who is the typical user?

## Myth

'Kids who sniff glue and that kind of thing are generally problem children from difficult homes.'

'Boys are much more likely to abuse substances than girls.'

'It's a problem for children in poor areas where prospects are bleak.'

'They have to have an addictive personality. Once you start sniffing, you won't stop. It'll be a long-term problem.'

'Sniffing is done in groups. Those in gangs are more at risk.'

## Reality

Users don't necessarily come from problem homes.

Both girls and boys experiment.

Sniffing occurs in affluent and poor areas.

Some users have a long-term problem, but others only experiment once or twice.

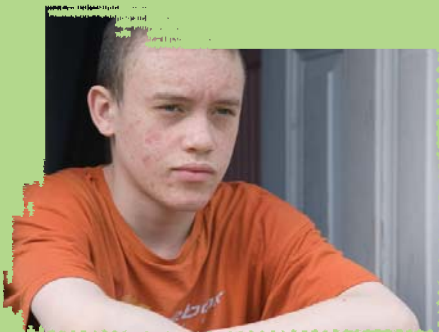
Although some sniff in groups, others do it alone.

**There is no typical user. People from all backgrounds – regardless of social class, geographical area, race or religion – have been known to experiment with or use gases, glues and aerosols.**

**In a 2005 survey of young people aged 11-15, 6% of boys and 7% of girls claimed to have sniffed substances within the past year.<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Smoking, drinking and drug use among young people in England in 2005, Health and Social Care Information Service (2006).

# why do young people try volatile substances?



**“It’s just exciting. I’ve never felt anything like this before. And it’s easier to get hold of aerosols than alcohol.”**  
Carl, 13

**“When I look back now, I think I got a kick out of the danger and shocking my parents.”** Mizbah, 22

**“I don’t want to look like a loser in front of my mates. If they do it, I do it.”** Owen, 14

**“I hated what was going on at school. This was my way of getting out of it.”** Helen, 18



**“I asked my daughter why she did it. She put it quite simply. She was bored. It was just something to do.”**  
Mother of user

**“I don’t see the big deal. Some people go drinking or clubbing together. This is our way of having fun.”** Shona, 16

# what are the effects?

## The short-term 'buzz'

- > users might feel dizzy and giggly. Some slur their speech and can't think clearly
- > movement is less coordinated, so people often stagger
- > lots of people say they feel happy and excited
- > but the hit is very short so some people sniff again and again to get the same feeling

## Not all the effects are pleasurable:

- > users can experience vomiting and blackouts
- > with some substances, users can hallucinate – which can be frightening
- > some substances cause a red rash around the mouth
- > a user might have delusions and behave dangerously or aggressively
- > after a hit, users can have a terrible headache and feel sleepy



### **Are volatile substances addictive?**

There's no evidence to suggest that users can get physically addicted to volatile substances. But they can become psychologically dependent or build up a tolerance after two to three days of continual use.

### **Longer-term effects – some effects can last for a few days.**

- > Health problems, such as headaches, stomach complaints, eye infections and coughs
- > Insomnia, disturbed sleep or difficulties waking up in the morning
- > A bigger or smaller appetite and changes in a user's drinking patterns
- > Fatigue, aggression or irritability
- > School work affected

# what are the dangers?

## There's no safe way to sniff volatile substances

Sniffing can kill instantly – some users die the first time they experiment. Latest published figures show that there was no evidence of a history of volatile substance abuse in 23% of deaths that occurred.

**Look out for the warning sign below. You will find this sign on products that can be used for substance abuse.**



### What are the worst risks?

- > sniffing can cause the heart to beat ineffectively and stop. The risk increases if users get over-excited or exert themselves after sniffing
- > spraying cold gas into the back of the throat can cause the throat to swell making it impossible to breathe, or slow the heart to a dangerous level

Although it is unusual for people using volatile substances to die, the risk increases if users ...

- > combine sniffing and alcohol
- > are surprised, shaken or chased after sniffing, because this increases pressure on the heart





### **There are other serious – but rare – risks**

- > in a few cases, users have fallen into a coma after inhaling too much of a volatile substance. This becomes more dangerous if somebody is sick while unconscious
- > users who sniff by putting a bag over their head risk suffocation
- > in very rare cases, continual use of volatile substances has damaged a person's liver, kidney or brain

### **Accidents**

- > when a user is 'high' they might take risks that they would not normally take. This is a particular risk for people who are hallucinating
- > many gases, glues and aerosols are highly flammable and can cause explosions and burns
- > lighting and smoking cigarettes while sniffing increases the risk of fire

# what signs should you look for?

As a parent or carer, it's only natural that you would want to protect your child from harm. The difficulty is that it's hard to distinguish many of the signs of VSA from normal adolescent behaviour.

## Young people abusing volatile substances might...

- > have a smell of chemicals on their breath or clothes
- > leave empty butane gas, aerosols or glue containers behind
- > act drunk, slur their speech or have little coordination when alcohol isn't a likely explanation
- > hang around with a new set of friends in secluded places
- > have more mood swings than is usual or major changes in their behaviour
- > find it difficult to get out of bed or go through changes in appetite
- > always have a runny nose or eye irritations
- > suffer from frequent headaches





## **Listen out...**

...for references to VSA when your child is with their friends. They might use terms like 'sniffing', 'gas head', 'buzzing gas' and 'tooting'.

## **Don't assume**

If your child shows some of the signs listed here, they aren't necessarily using volatile substances. It's best to talk calmly about your suspicions.



# how can you protect your child?

## **Talk to FRANK**

You can get information about VSA and protecting your child by contacting the Talk to FRANK helpline. To find out more, contact FRANK on 0800 77 66 00. Alternatively, you can visit [www.re-solv.org](http://www.re-solv.org), a charity dedicated to the prevention of volatile substance misuse.

## **Start talking about VSA**

You'll know when it's time to speak to your child, but it might be earlier than you think. There are reports of some children abusing gases, glues and aerosols in primary school.

## **Choose the time carefully**

Don't do it before they rush off to school.

## **Make sure they get the facts about sniffing**

And let them know your views. That way they'll know where they stand.

## **Listen with respect**

Don't lose your temper if they disagree with you.

## **Let them know you're there for them**

Tell them they can talk to you if they ever need to.

## **Set boundaries**

Make it clear what your house rules are, so they know what you will and won't accept.

**Latest published research shows that 4% of 15 year-olds and 6% of 12 year-olds said that they had sniffed volatile substances.**

# what if your child tries VSA?

## **Remember that most young people don't become problem users**

Most who do experiment stop after a few attempts and don't move on to trying illegal drugs.

## **Talk calmly with them**

To find out why they tried sniffing. If you get angry you might not find out what you need to know.

## **Never try to talk to them about VSA if they are high**

Don't scare them, shout or chase after them – it can increase the risk of sudden death.

## **Listen**

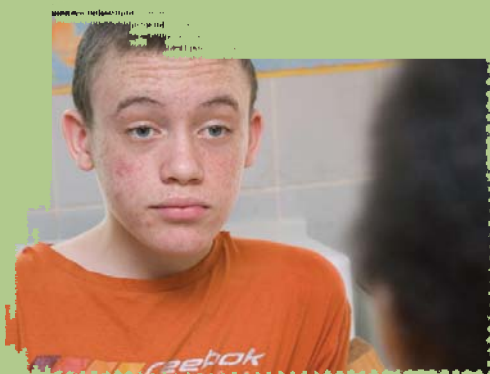
Are there problems that they need help with?

## **Support them**

Make sure they understand the dangers of what they have been doing, and let them know that you are prepared to help.

## **Call FRANK on 0800 77 66 00**

For confidential help and advice. Alternatively, contact one of the organisations listed on page 13 of this leaflet.



"We watched a character in a film get high using an aerosol. Michael said he knew people who had tried it. I realised it was time to talk."

**Mother of a teenage boy**

# in an emergency

What should you do if you find a young person who has taken a volatile substance and is drowsy or unconscious?

- > **don't panic**
- > **calmly take away the substance they have been taking**
- > **give them lots of fresh air**
- > **over-excitement or exertion increases the chance of sudden death**
- > **call an ambulance if they are unconscious**
- > **if they are conscious, stay with them until the effects have worn off**
- > **if possible – and without force – don't let them continue sniffing**
- > **don't chase them if they try to leave**
- > **save talking about their problem until a later date, when the effects are over**

**Never shake, chase or panic a person who has been sniffing volatile substances. It could lead to sudden death.**

# information and support

As well as **FRANK**, these other organisations could be useful

## Useful organisations

### Adfam

Support materials for people with a family member who takes drugs. Can help you find local support groups.

tel: 020 7553 7640

email: [admin@adfam.org.uk](mailto:admin@adfam.org.uk)

[www.adfam.org.uk](http://www.adfam.org.uk)

### Childline

Free 24-hour helpline for children or young people in trouble or danger.

tel: 0800 11 11

[www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk)

### Parents Against Drug Abuse (PADA)

Supporting parents of drug users.

tel: 08457 023 867

[www.pada.org.uk](http://www.pada.org.uk)

[admin@pada.org.uk](mailto:admin@pada.org.uk)

### Parentline Plus

Support and information for anyone parenting a child.

tel: 0808 800 2222

[www.parentlineplus.org.uk](http://www.parentlineplus.org.uk)

[centraloffice@parentlineplus.org.uk](mailto:centraloffice@parentlineplus.org.uk)

### Re-Solv

Charity dedicated to the prevention of volatile substance abuse. Information and advice via FRANK on 0800 77 66 00.

[www.re-solv.org](http://www.re-solv.org)

## SOLVE IT

Confidential advice, support and information service for young people, parents and carers.

tel: 01536 510010 or 07973 875413

[www.solveitonline.co.uk](http://www.solveitonline.co.uk)

## Young Minds

Free, confidential helpline providing information and advice for any adult with concerns about the mental health of a young person.

tel: 0800 018 2138

[www.youngminds.org.uk](http://www.youngminds.org.uk)

## Websites

[www.thesite.org](http://www.thesite.org)

A guide to the 'real world' for young people aged 16-25.

[www.e-parents.org](http://www.e-parents.org)

Online resource for parents on various topics.

[www.familyrapp.com](http://www.familyrapp.com)

Answers to parenting questions – includes a section on drugs.

[www.drugscope.org.uk](http://www.drugscope.org.uk)

In-depth information about drugs and volatile substance abuse.

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# FRANK

**0800 77 66 00**  
**talktofrank.com**

FRANK is available in 120 languages, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Calls are free from landlines and some mobiles. You can talk to FRANK confidentially:

- > on **0800 77 66 00**
- > by textphone (for the hard of hearing)  
**0800 917 8765**
- > by emailing  
**frank@talktofrank.com**

FRANK can also tell you what services are available in your area.