

# About inhalant abuse

Information for parents and community members



# Acknowledgments

The State Government of Victoria would like to acknowledge the *Petrol sniffing and other solvents resource kit for Aboriginal communities* developed by the Aboriginal Drug and Alcohol Council of South Australia and funded by the Department of Human Services, South Australia and Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing. This kit formed the basis for the information contained in this resource. The State Government of Victoria would also like to acknowledge the advice of the Koori Drug Strategy Advisory Committee including:

- Victorian Aboriginal Community Control Health Organisation
- Victorian Aboriginal Health Service
- Central Gippsland Aboriginal Health Cooperative
- Australia Torres Strait Islander Commission
- Aboriginal Hostels Ltd
- Rumbalara Aboriginal Cooperative
- Ngwala Willumbong Cooperative Limited
- Koori Education Unit, Department of Education and Training
- Koori Liaison Unit, Victoria Police
- Indigenous Issues Unit, Department of Justice, Victoria

# About this booklet



This booklet is for the Koori community, parents and relatives who may be worried that someone they know is sniffing inhalants.

This booklet tells you what it is, how it hurts our young people, why they are doing it and what can help.

Remember this is not just your problem. There is help you can get from going to your Co-op, health service or Koori drug and alcohol worker. There are also ideas in this booklet if you decide to get involved as part of the community to deal with the problem.

This booklet is also part of a larger kit that has been sent to Koori community workers to help address the problem.

**Caution: Making a big public issue of sniffing can, in some cases, lead to more kids sniffing. In general it is best to avoid telling kids about sniffing if they don't sniff.**

# Introduction



## Are you worried about sniffing?

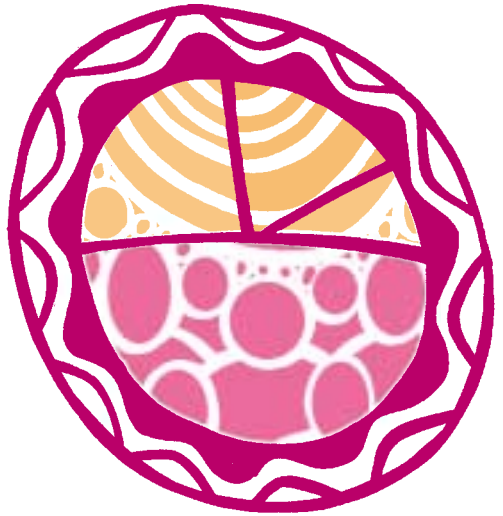
It's normal to be upset if you suspect someone you know is sniffing something. The best thing you can do is find out about it and try to stay calm. It might feel like a big problem, but even doing small things can make a difference.

## What are inhalants?

Inhalants are chemicals that give off fumes. There are hundreds of products that some people might sniff (also called chroming) such as spray paint, glues, petrol etc. This stuff smells awful to most of us. But sometimes people sniff the stuff and it is bad for their health. Sometimes the more a person sniffs the more problems they have. If a person sniffs a lot it causes a lot of damage.

## What happens to people who sniff?

People who have sniffed for a long time sometimes find it hard to remember things. Or they can find it hard to walk properly or they may get angry or violent for no reason. These people can't remember their stories or do other things they used to do. Sometimes, but not very often, sniffing can make someone so weak they can't fight diseases or look after themselves properly.



## Not all people who sniff are the same

Not all people who sniff do it the same way. In many places there are people who sniff just once in a while (we call them the 'sometimes mob') and some who sniff a lot (the 'most of the time mob') and some who sniff all the time (the 'sick mob'). Each of these people who sniff need to be helped in different ways.

### Sometimes mob

This mob try it a few times. Maybe when visitors come or when they get with the 'most of the time mob'. Mostly they grow out of it. What works with this mob? Some kids stop when their families or teachers find out and persuade them to stop. Or they decide after a couple of tries that they don't really like sniffing that much. This mob needs activities to stop the boredom, and they need to be told of the dangers.

### Most of the time mob

This mob sniffs most of the time. They might sniff on weekends, or after school with their friends. They can have problems like constant tiredness, sores to the throat and mouth, feeling sad and angry. What works with this mob? This mob needs activities to stop boredom, but they also need more help, like from a health worker. They maybe have problems at home too.

### The sick mob

This mob have sniffed too much. They can be a big worry. Sometimes these are the older kids and maybe their brains and bodies don't work real good. What works with this mob? Medical help is important and so is talking to a health worker.

## How do I know if someone is sniffing?

It is not easy to tell if someone is sniffing. There may be some signs, but you need to be careful not to jump to conclusions.

### Some signs of sniffing may be:

- Finding lots of glue, spray paint or other solvent containers where there is no obvious reason for their use.
- Paint around the mouth or on the face, hands or clothing.
- Strong chemical smells on their breath or clothes.
- Unexpected and rapid 'drunken' behaviour.

If the person has all these signs, then read further how you can help.

# What happens to inhalants in our body



1. Fumes from the substances go into our lungs.
2. Chemicals in the fumes go from our lungs into our blood.
3. Blood carries the chemicals up to our brain. The chemicals cause changes in how our brain works and this is the feeling chomers like.
4. Blood also carries the chemicals to other parts of our body, especially to the liver, kidneys and nerves.
5. Some of these chemicals are poisons. They collect in our brain and other places and build up to cause diseases and damage our body.



## What are the effects of sniffing?

The fumes of the solvent are breathed in through the mouth or nose. From the lungs they travel up to the brain where they cause changes, which create the feelings the people who sniff like. The effects are similar to alcohol only they happen much more quickly - in three to five minutes. A person intoxicated from solvent sniffing can act like they are drunk - slurred speech, stumbling around, sleepy or aggressive. If they quickly sniff a lot of a solvent, they can even black out.





Forgetting stories



crazy talk



Violent



Brain  
no good  
Headaches

Getting weak & sick



Liver  
no good



Heart & lungs  
no good



kidneys  
no good



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# Why are our kids chroming?

## What have kids in your community said?

The best way to find out why is to ask. When you ask kids they give you lots of reasons. Here is what some kids who sniff from Victoria have said:

'just wanted to try it because all my mates were doing it'.

'There's nothing to do here, we are bored, so we sniff, then we don't care about anything'.

'Mum and dad drink, smoke and use dope a lot. Sometimes they don't seem to care about us kids, there's no food. I get hungry but when I chrome I feel OK, no worries'.

'Most of the adults and elders say we're too young to drink. Lots of the older fellas get on the grog because there's no work here. But they don't include us. Paint's easy to get. Some older fellas come into town and say chroming is cool'.

The main reasons kids give for sniffing are:

- they like how it makes them feel
- it takes away some bad feelings
- because they feel bored
- because they want to be part of a gang, a mob.

# How the sniffing affects us



**Person who sniffs**



**Family**



**Community**

## **Person who sniffs**

- trouble at school/not going to school
- trouble with family
- accidents/passing out
- feeling groggy
- fights, smashing things
- forgetting things, sick brain
- sick.

## **Family and friends of the person who sniff**

- worried
- angry
- having things smashed or money taken
- scared of person who sniffs

- feeling no good
- feeling blamed by the community
- shame.

## **Community**

- trouble between families
- violence
- stores or houses smashed
- gangs and feeling unsafe
- co-op, police, school and clinic all feeling no good
- blaming of families
- young kids and old people suffering most.

# How to help/what to do?

## If they are sniffing:

- Try to stay calm.
- Don't yell or chase them – this can give their heart a big shock.
- Don't try to take the inhalant away – they might get angry.
- Get help if they are going to hurt themselves or someone else.
- If they have passed out, get help quick.
- If they are awake, talk quietly and try to get them home.

## After the sniffing:

- Talk with them only if they are calm (it's too hard to talk if they are angry).
- If they want to talk, remember to listen and not judge.
- Find out why they are sniffing, ask (What's happening in your life/how are you feeling about life/what is worrying you?)

- Encourage them to talk to someone, a health worker, family or elders, not just you.
- If they won't talk to someone, you could get advice from a co-op, health worker, alcohol and drug worker or doctor.

## Trust is important

If you want to help someone who sniffs they need to have trust in you. Trust isn't the same as liking someone – you can trust someone without liking them or like someone without trusting them. Listening and being fair are important parts of building up trust.

## Looking after yourself is important

If you are trying to do something about sniffing you have to make sure you look after yourself first of all. It's no good trying to do all sorts of things for other people if, at the same time, you get hurt or sick or your own family or children suffer. If you are healthy and safe then that is a good starting point for helping others.

# In an emergency



If the person is drowsy or **unconscious/ won't wake up or can hardly talk:**

- Lay them on their side so that if they vomit they won't choke.
- Make sure they have plenty of fresh air, take away anything they have been sniffing.
- Call for help - a doctor or ambulance.

If the person is **conscious/awake and able to talk:**

- Keep them calm, don't over-react and don't chase or shout at them.
- Try to remove any inhalants and make sure there is plenty of fresh air.
- Try to persuade them to stop sniffing, don't use force.

- Stay with them or get them somewhere safe until the effects have worn off (up to 60 minutes or more after they stop sniffing).
- Seek medical help if they are not recovering after the solvents have been removed.
- Don't try and talk with them about their sniffing when they are intoxicated.

## Should I call the police?

Sniffing is not illegal. Call the police if the person is in danger of hurting themselves or others, for example they are near a road or train line, or they are threatening to hurt someone.

# What can parents and the community do?

The problem is not just the sniffing, it is also what causes the sniffing. If there are no jobs, no training, nothing to do, kids can feel like they have no hope. If families are fighting kids will feel sad. This is why we need to make our communities stronger and healthier all the time. It doesn't have to be big, but there are lots of different ways to help our community. You can join in the community (*like helping with the school sports team or starting up a youth club*). And you can get help by talking to the Co-op or health worker.

## Things to prevent sniffing

- Jobs and training.
- Youth and cultural activities. Organise things for all kids to do – BBQ's, discos, sports, trips away, youth clubs, cultural activities (history and stories).
- Help families and communities to be strong, get involved in your community.
- Make inhalants hard for kids to get: Many store owners these days know that selling inhalants to young kids is wrong. There is a retailers kit especially to help retailers not to sell inhalants to young kids (number at the back of this booklet).



## Things to stop sniffing quickly when it starts

- Find out the facts about sniffing – talk to health workers.
- Education has worked before: Respected elders have talked to young kids about Aboriginal culture and how inhalants hurt the culture, and this seems to work. Remember it is important not to talk about sniffing to kids who don't sniff.
- Culture is important: All kids need to be told about their ancestors, how they lived, hunted, looked for bush food, made craft and weapons, painted and performed music.

## Things to stop the 'Most of the time mob'

- **Help each other:** Call a meeting and get together parents, relatives, elders and health workers to plan what to do.
- **Get a plan:** Work out a plan with your group to help the people who sniff. Consider why are the kids sniffing, where are they getting the inhalants from, what sort of help do they need, who else can help us?
- **Get the Co-op or drug and alcohol worker to help.** They can help with counselling or rehabilitation (this is a special program that a person who sniffs goes to for a few months in another area or town).

# Who can I call?

**If you are worried about sniffing, don't be afraid to ring and talk to someone.**

- **Victorian Aboriginal Health Service**  
186 Nicholson Street, Fitzroy, Victoria  
03 9419 3000
- **Directline** Phone 1800 888 236 – to talk to someone and get numbers for other services such as co-ops and health workers
- **Family Drug Help** 1300 660 068 – for family and friends to talk to someone and get family support
- **Youth Substance Abuse Service (YSAS)** – for young people (12–21 years) who have problems with drugs (alcohol, sniffing, marijuana etc)
- **Emergency** – Police or Ambulance phone 000
- Copies of the **Retailers Kit**:  
phone 03 9637 4030  
email [solvents@dhs.vic.gov.au](mailto:solvents@dhs.vic.gov.au)
- For more copies of this booklet and worker manuals phone the Koori Alcohol and Drug Program Coordinator 9637 5092