



(A joint project between the
Rotary Club of Brisbane
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Centre for Addiction Research & Education
(A division of DRUG ARM Australasia)

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volatile substance misuse

what is volatile substance misuse (vsm)?

Volatile Substance Misuse is the academic term to describe the deliberate inhalation of volatile (toxic) substances for intoxication. This range of common household and workplace substances gives off vapours or are gases at normal room temperature and are inhaled through the mouth or nose to give an intoxicating or “high” effect. These fall into several categories: Volatile Solvents, Fuels Aerosols/Gases, Anaesthetics and Nitrites.

some slang/street terms include:-

Chroming, Sniffing, Bagging, Huffing and Spraying.

how and why does vsm happen: a context for use

Volatile Substance Misuse happens in lots of different situations, and across many different groups in our community. The media focuses on its prevalence in public places with groups of young people, such as parks, shopping centres, city malls, unused car parks, train stations and out the back of public buildings. VSM also happens in private places like a young person’s bedroom, bathroom, wardrobe, underneath a house or out in the back shed.

History and research show that VSM occurs in cycles within Australian communities. Research also indicates an increased use of volatile substances at times when other drugs are not so readily available. Many people think that VSM is a new phenomenon. In fact, glue sniffing (a form of VSM) was a serious issue in Brisbane in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The trend re-emerged with the use of a greater range of volatile substances in early 2000.

VSM crosses all socio-economic and cultural boundaries in terms of its geographic and demographic use. It is an extremely complex issue, with the use of volatile substances often only the symptom of deeper personal trauma and conflict. Despite media focus on particular groups, this really is an issue that can affect anyone, anywhere. For example, recent research indicates that the main issues underlying VSM for Indigenous youth in inner Brisbane include: unstable living situations, lack of involvement with school, low levels of meaningful activity and boredom, a substance using peer group, lack of belonging to culture and high levels of mental health concerns (Butt, 2004).

The Law and vsm in Queensland

Many people are surprised to learn that the substances used for VSM are everyday legal products with legitimate uses. However, it is the deliberate misuse of these products by inhaling for intoxication which has dangerous and risky consequences. Unfortunately, volatile substances seem attractive because they are cheap, legal and accessible. However, the Queensland Government has passed new laws to help people who endanger their health and their lives through VSM.

The new laws are concerned with reducing access to and use of substances and improving the immediate help and longer-term support that users of volatile substances receive.

volatile substance misuse...

retailers Legislation

As of April 2004, it became an offence for retailers to sell volatile substances to people who they reasonably suspect may misuse them for intoxication. In July 2004, police were given the power to search people for substances and items used to inhale volatile substances and to seize them.

safe Places Trial

In addition to the above, under a trial of new laws from July 2004 until July 2005 in inner Brisbane, Logan, Townsville-Thuringowa, Cairns and Mt Isa, police are able to temporarily detain people misusing volatile substances for the purpose of taking them to a 'place of safety'. This is designated as home, a friend's or relative's home, hospital, or the specifically trial funded 'Place of Safety' within the 5 trial areas (Pockley, 2005).

why do people engage in vsm?

Just like with other drugs, people use volatile substances for lots of different reasons. It is a dangerous myth to assume that people get involved in VSM solely because of curiosity or peer pressure. Many young and older people heavily engaged in VSM have significant trauma, grief and loss issues within their extended friends and family, with which they are not coping. As with other mind-altering substances, VSM is a way to escape this harsh reality by getting high and blocking out the negative emotions associated with family problems and stress. VSM in Australia has a cyclical nature – appearing and receding in both urban and regional communities every couple of years. A number of factors have been identified as contributing to its appearance/increase. These include:

- The media (described as a 'media driven frenzy')
- The discovery or rediscovery of volatile substances
- Declines in the accessibility of other drugs
- The inability to pay for more expensive drugs of choice
- Changes in the social mix of groups
- The arrival of new users into communities or social groups, such as during weekends or holidays (DCPC, 2002)

short term effects

- Intoxication effect similar to alcohol, but very quick (effects in one to five minutes, wearing off in 3-40 minutes unless topped up)
- Increased and uneven heart rate and shallow breathing
- Hallucinations and hearing noises – pleasant or frightening
- Sensitivity to light, double vision, staggering and disorientation
- Aggressive behavior (either towards others or self)
- Anxiety, tension, mood swings, depression and paranoia
- Flu-like symptoms including: sneezing, coughing, red eyes, runny or bleeding nose, nausea and severe headaches

Long term effects

- Acoustic nerve and muscle – destruction of cells that relay sound to the brain may cause deafness
- Blood – the oxygen carrying capacity of the blood is inhibited
- Bone marrow – components containing benzene have been shown to cause leukemia

- Brain – damage is also caused to the cerebral cortex and the cerebellum, resulting in personality changes, memory impairment, hallucinations, loss of coordination and slurred speech
 - Heart – Sudden Sniffing Death (SSD) * syndrome, an unexpected disturbance in the heart's rhythm, may cause fatal cardiac arrhythmias (heart failure)
 - Kidneys – the kidney's ability to control the amount of acid in the blood may be impaired. Kidney stones may develop after use is terminated
 - Liver – gathering of fatty tissue may cause liver damage
 - Lungs – damaged lungs and impaired breathing occurs with repeated use
 - Muscle – chronic use can lead to muscle wasting and reduced muscle tone and strength
 - Peripheral nervous system – damage to the nerves may result in numbness, tingling, and paralysis
 - Skin – a severe rash around the nose and mouth from repeated contact of volatile substances with skin
- * SSD syndrome may result when a user deeply inhales a chemical for the effect of intoxication. This causes a decrease in available oxygen in the body. If the user then becomes startled or engages in sudden physical activity, an increased flow of adrenalin from the brain to the heart can induce cardiac arrest and death within minutes (National Inhalant Prevention Coalition 2005).

Associated health concerns

Other health problems include: paleness, tremors, weight loss, tiredness, thirst, anaemia, irritability and illogical thinking. The toxic chemicals in volatile substances also cross the placenta and can affect unborn babies during pregnancy.

What to do in an emergency

It is really important that you know what to do in an emergency. If someone collapses:

- Stay calm
- Stay with the person affected
- Allow them to breathe fresh air
- Move them out of danger
- Place them in the recovery position if unconscious
- Seek medical help IMMEDIATELY
- Commence CPR if they have stopped breathing

If you or someone you know is affected by Volatile Substance Misuse, you don't need to go through it alone. Here is a contact to get you started:

DRUG ARM Australasia 1300 656 800 for telephone help, or to arrange one on one support and counselling.

References

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- National Inhalant Prevention Coalition, 2005. url:<http://www.inhalants.org>
- Parliament of Victoria Drugs and Crime Prevention Committee (DCPC) 2002, Inquiry into the Inhalation of Volatile Substances – Final Report, Government Printer, Melbourne.
- Pockley, 2005, "Volatile Substance Misuse: An Ongoing Concern", Of Substance, vol.3, no.1, pp 8-11.

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