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Millions Risk Their Lives by Using Inhalants Guidelines Tell Medical Examiners How to Diagnose Inhalant Death

No one knows how many people are dying from inhalant abuse every year, but we know millions use inhalants, particularly young people. A new set of guidelines for medical examiners, coroners and pathologists, to educate them to the serum chemistry, lab tests and tissue and fluid specimens that could allow for a diagnosis of inhalant death, was released today by the National Inhalant Prevention Coalition at a press conference in Washington D.C. Funding for the expert panel that created the guidelines was provided by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), which simultaneously released a new report from the 2002 National Survey on Drug Use and Health that show that more than 2.6 million youths aged 12 to 17 used inhalants at least once in their lifetime.

New information from the Partnership for a Drug-Free America shows that there has been significant erosion in attitudes among sixth graders about the dangers of inhalants and a two-year trend of increase of abuse of inhalants among children in the sixth grade.

“When you put all the data together you see that millions of youth are in danger,” SAMHSA Administrator Charles Curie said. “Anytime an inhalant is used, someone’s life can be snuffed out by sudden sniffing death syndrome, which can occur on first use or any random subsequent use. SAMHSA is working to prevent inhalant use and supporting education of professionals and the public about the dangers of inhalant abuse.”

Harvey Weiss, National Inhalant Prevention Coalition executive director, points out: “The guidelines significantly add to the knowledge base about inhalant abuse. The scope of this problem will be better defined. Regional and demographic variations will be better tracked. Information derived from outcomes of this tracking will be a valuable tool for evaluating prevention and treatment interventions.”

The guidelines were created by an expert panel convened by the National Inhalant Prevention Coalition, with support from SAMHSA, to address the issue of unreported and undetected inhalant abuse fatalities. The experts created guidelines that can be used by medical examiners, coroners and pathologists, to enable them to detect when inhalants is the cause of death. They involve everything from scene investigation, to history of the subject, to the chemical components in popular inhalants, to external and internal postmortem examination and collection of toxicological samples.

John Walters, Director of National Drug Control Policy said: "Inhalant abuse is a serious problem in this country. Sniffing or huffing highly concentrated amounts of the chemical in solvents or aerosol sprays can directly induce heart failure and death within minutes. If we are to continue to make the drug problem among young people smaller, we must make sure that parents know what the signs of inhalant abuse are and help them do everything they can to keep young people away from these potentially deadly substances."

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"We know that inhalant use starts early and that long-term abusers are among the most difficult drug abuse patients to treat. It is critical that research efforts to characterize the behavioral effects of inhalants intensify, so that more effective preventions, interventions, and treatments can be developed," Timothy P. Condon, Ph.D., Deputy Director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse, said.

The SAMHSA report points out that over four percent of youth 12-17 used inhalants in the past year and 10.5 percent had used inhalants some time in their lives. The most frequently used substances were glue, shoe polish or toluene, followed by gasoline or lighter fluids and spray paints. Other frequently inhaled substances include correction fluid, degreasers, cleaning fluids, nitrous oxides (whippets) amyl nitrite (poppers), locker room odorizers (rush), aerosol sprays, lacquer thinner and other paint solvents. Among youths who had used an inhalant, 53 percent used more than one type in their lifetimes.

The SAMHSA data show that the peak years for inhalant use are ages 14 or 15, where 4.9 percent used inhalants in the past year. The Partnership for Drug-Free America found an erosion of anti-inhalant attitudes and increasing use among 6th and 8th graders. In just two years, agreement with the statement "sniffing or huffing things to get high can kill you" plunged from 68 percent to 48 percent among 6th graders and from 73 percent to 63 percent for 8th graders, according to the Partnership Attitude Tracking Study.

"New data paint a startling picture of weak risk attitudes that resulted in an increase in inhalant use in the last two years from 18 percent to 26 percent for 6th graders and 22 percent to 26 percent for 8th graders," said Steve Pasierb, president and CEO of the Partnership for a Drug-Free America. "It's important to note, these increases come against a backdrop of overall declining youth illicit drug use as well as declining alcohol and tobacco use. The attitudinal data deliver a clear message of warning: The number of children abusing inhalants is very likely to increase – and will continue increasing – until we address and change the underlying attitudes kids have about this destructive form of substance abuse."

The twelfth National Inhalants & Poisons Awareness Week is March 21 through 27.

The National Inhalants Prevention Coalition guidelines are available on the web at www.inhalants.org. SAMHSA's data is available at www.drugabusestatistics.samhsa.gov. The Partnership for Drug-Free America information is available at www.drugfreeamerica.org.