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Inhaling Helium Seems Like Fun Until Someone Dies

Most people think it is harmless fun. Inhale helium from a balloon or tank and talk in a squeaky voice. Unless, of course, someone dies. Fourteen-year-old Ashley Long, who died last month, is the latest victim.

Instead of harmless fun, intentionally inhaling helium is like inhaling other household substances. A person can cut off oxygen supply; or inhale so deeply that it causes an embolism; or the pressurized gas from tanks can literally cause lungs to rupture. Yet, unknowing, adults provide helium for kids parties, and children surf the Web to find instructions.

Available on You Tube, and on the OUTFIT 7 game site, is Gina the helium-huffing giraffe that encourages kids to inhale helium, talk funny and upload their videos. The National Inhalant Prevention Coalition (NIPC) was told a little over a week ago by OUTFIT 7's U.S. representative, Rebecca Silliman of SutherlandGold Group, that they will take down the helium huffing segment. But how many more are out there? NIPC convinced FedEx in 1999 to remove its helium huffing Munchkins that were a featured Super bowl ad. But this was followed by Toys R Us, Hallmark Cards, Mars Candy and Geico producing ads that included helium huffing. These were also taken down after complaints.

There are few comprehensive statistics on deaths from helium huffing, since the federal government does not collect them and few states do. Florida does collect data. In 2010, approximately 20 percent of Florida's 38 inhalant deaths involved helium. While 9 victims is a small number, this is one year of deaths in one state. <http://www.fdle.state.fl.us/Content/getdoc/9256e6e4-67bf-4a02-a7c6-3f1e93fde6c1/2010DrugReport.aspx>

"Our homes are too often the source of dangerous drugs of abuse for young people," said Gil Kerlikowske, Director of National Drug Control Policy. "Whether it's prescription drugs or household products stored under the kitchen sink, parents should remember that just because something is legal doesn't mean it is safe. We encourage parents to visit www.TheAntiDrug.com to learn more about the dangers of huffing and what they can do to keep kids safe and healthy."

"Helium is very dangerous and nobody knows about it," Ashley's step-father, Justin Earp, said. "Right now a four year old can go buy a balloon filled with helium and inhale it. They are handing them out without any warnings. A grandmother contacted us to say thank you for spreading the word. Her grandson had asked for four helium balloons for his birthday so he could talk like Donald Duck. Now he won't get them."

Harvey Weiss, Executive Director of the National Inhalant Prevention Coalition (NIPC), explained: “ Unknowing adults demonstrate and often provide helium to kids at parties or science teachers use it in classes to demonstrate the effects of a gas on vocal cords. Gina the Giraffe was part of an online game. Even if kids did not get into the game, they saw Gina intentionally huffing helium for fun. Many other You Tube videos show how much fun it is to huff helium and demonstrate how to do it. For years I have heard “everybody does it” and sure enough parents do it as well as scout leaders, science teachers and even youth pastors. This normalizing of huffing needs to stop and all of us can play a role in that. We must be advocates for children.”

“Prevention is key to reducing inhalant use and needs to involve parents, communities and teachers,” said Dr. David Shurtleff, acting deputy director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse, part of the National Institutes of Health.

Brian Dyak, president of the Entertainment Industries Council, Inc., said: “Educating children on the dangers of inhalants, and adults on the consequences of abuse of products in their own home, is an obligation we have within our society. When you consider one show, one accurate depiction, reaches millions and can be passed on through conversation and social media to an even broader audience, it becomes clear that we must work with members of the entertainment industry to spread awareness, and not turn away from the implications of misuse of products. However, this must be done carefully. The more accurate depictions and consequences we present, the more positive change we, as an industry, can create.”

Today’s press conference kicked-off the 20th Annual National Inhalants & Poisons Awareness Week (NIPAW), which runs March 18-24, 2012. NIPC gratefully acknowledges support from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s Center for Substance Abuse Treatment and the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

National Inhalant Prevention Coalition (NIPC) information is available on the Web at www.inhalants.org. NIDA inhalants information is available at www.inhalants.drugabuse.gov. ONDCP inhalant material is on the Web at www.TheAntiDrug.com. Ashley’s Hope, begun by the Earps, is on the Web at www.AshleysHope.org.