

---

# A Retailer's Response to Inhalants

Practical advice that's good for your business  
and good for your community.

---

**Queensland**



---

## **Acknowledgements**

This resource has been developed by Dovetail with funding through the Australian Government's Petrol Sniffing Strategy.

Dovetail is an initiative of Metro North Mental Health - Alcohol and Drug Service, Queensland Health.

This resource was developed with the support and assistance of the Aboriginal & Islander Development & Recreational Womens Association Mount Isa Inc, The Drug and Alcohol Office (Government of Western Australia), the Mt Isa Substance Misuse Action Group, and AVSM services across Queensland.

First published in 2014 and updated with support from federal, state, and local organisations and services.

This document is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Australia licence.  
To view a copy of this licence, visit [creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/au](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/au)

© State of Queensland (Metro North Health), 2025.

For more information or to download copies of this resource please visit  
[insight.qld.edu.au/inhalantsupply](http://insight.qld.edu.au/inhalantsupply)

---

# Contents

4	..... What is inhalant use?
6	What products can be inhaled? .....
8	..... What are the effects of inhalants?
10	What are the signs that someone ..... might be using inhalants?
12	..... What does the law say?
14	How do I respond to customers ..... who may be using inhalants?
16	..... Good for you. Good for your community.

# What is inhalant use?

A small number of people deliberately inhale the vapours from household products in order to feel 'high'. Inhalant use is sometimes called volatile substance use (VSU).

Some people use inhalants out of curiosity or for fun, while a smaller number do it as a way of coping with personal problems in their life. This behaviour can contribute to a range of issues for the individual, their peers, their families and the broader community. It can also cause problems for retailers who stock inhalable products, their staff and customers.

Responding to inhalant use requires action from the whole community - health workers, youth services, schools, police, security staff, retailers, contractors, manufacturers and other community leaders.

**This kit has been developed to assist retailers to play their part in the community response to inhalant use. By being a part of this response, businesses can save money, provide a safer workplace and build their reputation as a responsible retailer.**

---

“By working together, we can minimise the harm from inhalant use and help to build a better future for the community.”

---



# What products can be inhaled?

A wide range of products can be inhaled. The trends of product types used for intoxication can change over time.

Below is a list of commonly available products that can be inhaled for intoxication. Chemicals in these products contain volatile substances that quickly change to a gas (evaporate) at room temperature. This list is not exhaustive and there may be other products in your store that can be inhaled - see page 18 for more details.



## **Solvents**

- petrol
- spray paint
- glue
- degreaser
- cleaning products
- paint stripper
- correction fluid



## Aerosols

deodorant  
spray paint  
hairspray  
cooking oil



## Gases

butane (lighter refill cans, camp stove cartridges)  
nitrous oxide (for whipped cream dispensers)

Note: Do not display lists of inhalable products openly. It risks people learning about and inhaling products they didn't know about.

# What are the effects of inhalants?

When a person uses an inhalant, the chemicals go from their lungs to their brain causing effects almost immediately. The person experiences effects similar to alcohol, but effects wear off quickly once someone stops inhaling. This leads some people to continue, “topping up”, in order to stay intoxicated.

---

“As well as physical health problems, inhalants can cause social problems. Many of these social problems have impacts on other people, particularly families, and sometimes whole communities can be affected.”

---

## Some common effects are listed below

---



While a person is intoxicated from inhalants, they may feel a range of effects from happy and excited to disorientated and drowsy. Their behaviour might be erratic and some people may experience hallucinations. Long-term use may result in damage to the brain, particularly in the areas of speech and memory.



Volatile substances are toxic to the body and can slow down a person's heart rate and breathing. Chronic use can result in pneumonia or other respiratory problems including persistent cough.



These substances can affect the heart's rhythm. This means that someone is more likely to have a heart attack when intoxicated (sometimes referred to as 'sudden sniffing death'), especially if they have an underlying heart condition. This can happen the very first time someone uses inhalants. For this reason, **it is important not to startle or chase someone who is using inhalants.**



People who are intoxicated have a higher risk of accidental injury or death resulting from falls or traffic incidents. They are also at risk of choking or suffocating if using plastic bags to inhale certain products.



As well as these physical health problems, inhalants can cause social and emotional wellbeing problems such as dropping out of school, losing a job, legal issues, relationship breakdown, loss of friends or someone becoming homeless.



## What are the signs that someone might be using inhalants?

---

“Be conscious  
of stock that  
mysteriously  
‘disappears’ and  
find out if it can be  
inhaled.”

---

---

**Whilst it can be difficult to know if a customer is using inhalants, the following list may assist you to recognise some of the common signs:**

- appearing dazed, dizzy or disoriented
- chemical smell on clothes, skin or breath
- deodorant powder, paint or glue stains on clothes or skin
- slurred or difficult to understand speech
- irritated skin around the nose and mouth
- red, glassy eyes
- unsteady on their feet
- nervous, excited or appearing irritated
- a person using inhalants may behave in a similar way to someone intoxicated from alcohol.

Some people who use may steal inhalable items. Be aware of how you store these products and consider monitoring them more closely – suggestions for monitoring on page 15.

**Other signs that a person may be going to use an inhalant include**

- asking for specific products that you know can be used for intoxication
- frequent purchases of a product you know can be used for intoxication
- purchasing a large quantity of a product you know can be used for intoxication.

---

# What does the law say?

**In Queensland it is against the law to sell a harmful product to someone if you think they are going to inhale or ingest it.** This also applies if you think they are going to sell it to someone else who plans to misuse products in this way.

**It is also against the law to sell spray paint to anyone under the age of 18.**

If you suspect that a customer attempting to purchase spray paint is a minor, you must ask for their ID before proceeding with the sale.

Sellers of spray paint must also display signage at each point of sale stating that they are prohibited from selling the product to minors.

If you sell inhalable products, we encourage you to read the excerpt from Section 23 of the “Summary Offences Act 2005” on page 19 of this guide.

**Remember, before refusing sale you must have a reasonable belief that the customer is going to misuse the product (that is inhale, ingest or sell on for this purpose). Refusing sale on unreasonable grounds like the person’s age (except in the case of spray paint), gender or race could be considered discrimination.**

Note: For information on legislation in other Australian states and territories, see the *Inhalants and the law* section of the Alcohol and Drug Foundation’s inhalants fact sheet ([adf.org.au/drug-facts/inhalants](http://adf.org.au/drug-facts/inhalants)).

---

“Refusing sale based on unreasonable grounds like the person’s age (except in the case of spray paint), gender or race could be considered discrimination.”

---



## **How do I respond to customers who may be using inhalants?**



# Here are some tips for responding effectively.

---

Calmly explain to the person that it is against the law to sell them the product. Most people will accept this and leave without incident.

Use “we” statements instead of “I” statements. This shows it is not the salesperson’s decision, it is store policy and the law.

Refer to signage that reinforces the store policy. Offer to get the store manager to explain the policy.

If the person becomes abusive or threatening, consider the safety of staff and other customers. In some cases it may NOT be safe to refuse sale. If this happens, ensure the staff member is supported after any incident and consider your options in notifying youth or community services or contacting police.

Train new staff to make sure they are familiar with the policy and appropriate responses.

For better monitoring, place inhalable products behind the counter or in a location visible to staff.

Use ‘dummy’ containers for display purposes.

Display extra signage around the store that reinforces the store policy and law.

Be mindful NOT to openly display lists or pictures of inhalable products (such as provided in this kit) that may alert people to products they didn’t know about.

Discuss any ongoing issues with local police who may have suggestions on improving store security.

Contact youth, health, welfare services and community leaders who might also be responding to inhalant use in your local community.

---

**Remember not to chase or startle customers who may be intoxicated as they are at a greater risk of having a heart attack.**

# Good for you. Good for your community.

## **Responsible supply of inhalable products is good for business.**

- You will reduce the theft of stock.
- Your staff and customers will feel safer.
- You will build your reputation as a responsible retailer.
- You will be complying with legal requirements.

## **You are also helping your community.**

You are part of a broader community response to inhalant use which may involve health workers, youth services, police and product manufacturers.

Together we can reduce the availability of inhalants used for intoxication and minimise the harms they can cause to individuals and communities.

---

“By being a responsible retailer you are helping your community in its response to inhalant use.”

---



## Examples of inhalants and their chemical components

Category	Inhalant	Chemicals
<b>Adhesives</b>	Airplane glue	Toluene, ethyl acetate
	Other glues	Toluene, n-hexane, acetone, benzene, methyl chloride, methyl ethyl ketone, methyl butyl ketone
<b>Aerosols</b>	Hair spray	Butane, propane
	Deodorants	Butane, propane
	Spray paint	Butane, propane, fluorocarbons, toluene, trichloroethylene
	Fabric protector spray	Butane, trichloroethane
	Computer cleaners	Dimethyl ether, butane, propane, n-hexane
	Asthma sprays	Chlorofluorocarbons
<b>Anaesthetics</b>	Gaseous	Nitrous oxide
	Liquid	Halothane, enflurane
	Local	Ethyl chloride
<b>Cleaning agents</b>	Dry cleaners	Tetrachloroethylene, trichloroethane, n-hexane
	Spot removers	Xylene, petroleum distillates, chloro-hydrocarbons
	Degreasers	Tetrachloroethylene, trichloroethane, trichloroethylene
	Video head cleaners	Amyl nitrite, butyl nitrite, cyclohexyl nitrite
<b>Solvents</b>	Nail polish removers	Acetone, ethyl acetate, toluene
	Paint remover/thinners	Toluene, methylene chloride, methanol, acetone, ethyl acetate, xylene, Trichloroethylene, petroleum distillates
	Correction fluids and thinners	Trichloroethane, trichloroethylene
	Permanent marker pens	Xylene
	Petrol	Benzene, toluene, n-hexane, xylene, possibly lead
<b>Gases</b>	Fuel gas	Butane, propane
	Cigarette lighter fuel	Butane, propane
	Refrigerant	Freon
<b>Food products</b>	Whipped cream aerosols (whippets)	Nitrous oxide
<b>Nitrates</b>	Poppers, fluids, room odorisers	Amyl nitrite, butyl nitrite, cyclohexyl nitrite

Note: Do not display lists of inhalable products openly. It risks people learning about and inhaling products they didn't know about.

## Excerpt from the Summary Offences Act 2005

### Part 2 Offences

#### 23 Sale of potentially harmful things

(1) A seller must not sell a potentially harmful thing to another person if the seller knows or believes, on reasonable grounds, that the other person—  
(a) intends to inhale or ingest the thing; or  
(b) intends to sell the thing to another person for inhalation or ingestion whether by that person or someone else.

#### Maximum penalty

(a) for a first offence—25 penalty units or 3 months imprisonment; or  
(b) for a second or later offence—50 penalty units or 1 year's imprisonment.  
(2) For the purposes of the Anti-Discrimination Act 1991, section 46, a seller is not to be taken to discriminate against a person only because the seller refuses to sell a potentially harmful thing to the person because of subsection (1).

(3) In this section—

#### **potentially harmful thing—**

(a) means a thing a person may lawfully possess that is or contains a substance that may be harmful to a person if ingested or inhaled; and

#### **Examples—**

- glue
- paint
- a solvent

(b) includes methylated spirits; and

(c) does not include a thing intended by its manufacturer to be inhaled or ingested by a person using it.

#### 23B Sale of spray paint to minors

(1) A seller of spray paint must not sell spray paint to a minor.

#### Maximum penalty—

(a) for a first offence—140 penalty units; or  
(b) for a second offence—280 penalty units; or  
(c) for a third or later offence—420 penalty units.

#### 23D Seller of spray paint must display prohibition sign

(1) A seller of spray paint who is an employer must display, as prescribed under a regulation, a prohibition sign at each point of sale at the seller's retail outlet.

Maximum penalty—20 penalty units.

**For the full legislation visit  
[www.legislation.qld.gov.au](http://www.legislation.qld.gov.au)**

### Sources

Austin Health (n.d.) Inhalants/volatile substances ('chroming'). Available at: [https://www.austin.org.au/Assets/Files/Inhalants%20Volatile%20substance%20abuse%20'chroming'%20\\_ZK%20final\\_SG%5b1%5d.pdf](https://www.austin.org.au/Assets/Files/Inhalants%20Volatile%20substance%20abuse%20'chroming'%20_ZK%20final_SG%5b1%5d.pdf)

d'Abbs, P. and MacLean, S. (2008) Volatile substance misuse: A review of intervention. National Drug Strategy monograph series no. 65. Canberra: Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing.

Government of Western Australia Drug and Alcohol Office (2007) Selling volatile substances: Information for retailers. Available at: <http://www.dao.health.wa.gov.au>

National Health and Medical Research Council (2011) Consensus-based clinical practice guideline for the management of volatile substance use in Australia. Melbourne: National Health and Medical Research Council, p. 28.

National Inhalants Information Service (2013) National Inhalants Information Service Australia. Woden, ACT. Available at: [http://www.inhalantsinfo.org.au/about\\_inhalants.php](http://www.inhalantsinfo.org.au/about_inhalants.php)

Perry, H. (n.d.) Inhalant misuse in children and adolescents. Available at: <https://www.uptodate.com/contents/inhalant-misuse-in-children-and-adolescents>

Queensland Government (2005) Summary Offences Act 2005 (Qld). Section 23. Available at: <http://www.legislation.qld.gov.au>

Radparvar, S. (2023) 'The clinical assessment and treatment of inhalant abuse', The Permanente Journal, 27(2), pp. 99–109. doi:10.7812/tpp/22.164.

Sharp, C.W. and Rosenberg, N.L. (2005) 'Inhalants', in Lowinson, J., Ruiz, P., Millman, R. and Langrod, J. (eds.) Substance abuse: A comprehensive textbook. 4th edn. Philadelphia, PA: Lippincott Williams & Wilkins, Ch. 20, p. 341.

# Where can I find more information?

In the event of an emergency, immediately dial Triple Zero (“000”) and notify the store’s first aid officer and/or manager. Follow basic first aid protocols, including any instructions provided by the emergency services operator.

To access this Retailers Kit online and to order additional copies.

[insight.qld.edu.au/inhalantsupply](http://insight.qld.edu.au/inhalantsupply)

(07) 3837 5621

dovetail@health.qld.gov.au

## **Adis 24/7 Alcohol and Drug Support**

In Queensland, Adis provides 24-hour, 7 day a week support for anyone concerned about their own or somebody else’s alcohol and other drugs use. It’s free, anonymous and confidential.

1800 177 833

## **Outside of Queensland**

Call the National Alcohol & Other Drug Hotline

1800 250 015

### **Your Local Service Contact**



**Australian Government**

**Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet**

**Dovetail**

Supporting the youth alcohol and other drug sector in Queensland