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INHALANT ABUSE DIFFICULT TO TREAT; PREVENTION A NECESSITY

Inhaling or “huffing” seemingly harmless items such as bleach, glue or paint remover can result in one of the most difficult addictions to treat, primarily because inhalant abuse can cause irreversible brain damage, memory lapses and other neurological problems.

More than 1,000 household items such as these can become deadly in the hands of children using such chemicals to experiment with huffing. The biggest danger in using inhalants, however, is that kids can die the first time, the third time or the 100th time they experiment, said Ben Brown, deputy commissioner for substance abuse services at the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services.

The week of March 16-22 is National Inhalants and Poisons Awareness Week, designed to educate parents and others about the dangers of inhalant abuse.

Nationally, nearly 2 million Americans ages 12 and older used inhalants in the past year, Brown said. While the use of inhalants is declining among eighth, 10th and 12th graders, inhalant abuse is still the third most popular drug among pre-teens, and drops to fourth most popular substance of abuse in high school only as children discover marijuana.

Inhalants are popular with children because they are widely available, inexpensive, easy to conceal and legal.

“Inhalant abuse is extremely difficult to treat,” Brown said. “In fact, many substance abuse and medical professionals don’t recognize the signs of inhalant abuse or know how to treat youth and young adults who need treatment. That is why prevention is such a necessity.”

Parents should be aware of symptoms of inhalant use, including chemical odors on breath or clothing; paint or other stains on the face, hands or clothes; drunk or disoriented appearance; slurred speech; inattentiveness; lack of coordination; hidden empty spray paint or solvent containers; and chemical-soaked rags or clothing.

Inhalant use can cause a number of health problems, including suffocation. Short-term health problems include heart palpitations, breathing difficulty, dizziness and headaches. Long-term symptoms involve damage to the brain, nerve cells, heart and lungs.

Parents can influence their children’s choices by paying attention and communicating, Brown said. Other tips include the following:

- Be absolutely clear with your children that you don’t want them to use inhalants or other drugs. Don’t leave room for interpretation. Talk often – more than once or twice a year – about the dangers of drug and alcohol use.
- Don’t react in a way that will cut off further discussion. If your child says things that challenge or shock you, respond with a calm discussion of why people use drugs and whether doing so is worth the risk.

- Be involved in your child's life. Always know where your children are and what they're doing. Get to know your child's friends and their parents. And find time to spend with your child each week.

- Eat dinner with your children as often as possible, and attend religious services as a family.

For more information about inhalants, visit the National Inhalants and Poisons Awareness Week website at www.inhalants.org. or contact the Oklahoma Department of Mental Health and Substance Abuse Services Prevention Resource Center, located in Suite 82 at Shepherd Mall in Oklahoma City, (405) 522-3810.

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