



# Daily Herald

Big Picture . Local Focus

## State launches program to combat inhalant use, educate parents

By Erin Holmes

[eholmes@dailyherald.com](mailto:eholmes@dailyherald.com)

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Second in a two-part series

It started in gym class.

A locker room dare.

Eventually, Trevor started huffing more often for kicks, inhaling from a canister of aerosol deodorant spray.

When his parents plunked him into a rehab program for his other habits -- alcohol and "harder" drugs -- inhaling became an evening ritual for the Mount Prospect teen.

He'd suck down a canister of deodorant a night. One puff at a time, holding it in as long as he could, going numb on his tongue and roof of his mouth. Emptying the canister in 20 minutes and crashing into a headachy sleep.

It was his perfect fix: Readily available. Cheap. A breeze to explain away to unsuspecting parents who spotted the cans in the trash. And, like the momentary high itself, the chemicals' existence in his body was fleeting.

It evaded all his drug tests.

That's the thing about inhalant abuse, experts say.

It tends to fool everybody.

"People minimize it, like, 'Oh, come on, it can't be that bad,'" said Michael Moran, director of Breaking Free substance abuse treatment center in Naperville. "Well, it can be."

### Under the radar

Though inhalants reportedly have been used by hundreds of thousands of American kids and are terrifyingly dangerous -- they can kill in a single breath -- the toxic substances have hovered largely under the radar, a mere footnote to the nation's war on drugs.

Until now.

With help from agencies across the state, the Alliance for Consumer Education just launched the Illinois Inhalant Abuse Prevention Program: a massive effort to educate parents about the reality of sniffing household products -- from nail polish and paint to whipped cream canisters and computer cleaners -- to get high.

Prevention kits with background on inhalants, symptoms of abuse and tips for talking about it will be distributed in schools across the state. They'll also be available free online to parents.

Even the most optimistic of drug counselors acknowledge the new initiative isn't an instant cure-all. But they insist education can be beneficial, citing decreased cigarette use in the wake of anti-smoking campaigns.

"It's the fastest way to get the message out," says John McGuinness, a program coordinator for the FAIR drug center in Rolling Meadows. He notes teens today still refer to the 1980s commercials that used a fried egg to depict a brain on drugs. "I know this is effective."

McGuinness said he's now seeing a resurgence of inhalant abuse -- frustratingly, among kids who believe the stuff they're sucking in is little more than canned air.

The more deadly reality is a chemical smorgasbord: butane, acetone, toluene, propane and fluorocarbons.

"I don't think people usually think of them as being drugs of abuse, because they're in every household," said Michael Wahl, managing director of the Illinois Poison Center. But "the first time you inhale, you could change the way your heart works."

Inhalants today are more popular than any other drug besides alcohol, tobacco or marijuana.

And, likely because of their vast availability, they're most often used by preteens or younger teens like Trevor, experts say. Use tends to drop off as kids get older and either realize drugs are dangerous or graduate to other substances.

Parents normally don't spot it, experts add, either because they dismiss inhalants as little threat or because they don't know, or don't notice, signs of abuse.

In a 2006 Partnership for a Drug-Free America survey, only 5 percent of parents said they believed their teens had abused inhalants. But in the same study, one in five teenagers -- 20 percent nationally -- said they actually had.

A 2006 study in Park Ridge Elementary District 64 revealed 13 percent of seventh-graders had at some point tried inhalants. Data from the 2002 to 2005 National Surveys on Drug Use and Health shows an average of 1.1 million kids aged 12 to 17 said they'd huffed in the prior year.

A 2005 study of 700 sixth- through 12th-graders in Batavia found that instances of substance abuse had declined in the past four years in every area except inhalants. Their usage remained at 9 percent.

In the aftermath, Batavia's Rotolo Middle School banned aerosol sprays from campus.

### **You'd be surprised**

The 2006 University of Michigan-led Monitoring the Future study yielded another worrisome finding: Less than half of surveyed eighth- and 10th-graders perceived there to be a "great risk" were they to give inhalants a try.

That's a deadly misperception.

"I have people ask me, 'What's the most dangerous drug?' And I really consider inhalants to be the most dangerous," said Carol Falkowski of the Minnesota-based Hazelden Foundation. They're scary, she adds, both for their accessibility and their irreversible effects.

The breathed-in chemicals produce only a brief, dizzying, headache-inducing high, exiting the system too fast to be caught by most drug tests.

But they also can prompt stifling, lasting ailments like memory loss, speech problems, liver and brain damage and a Parkinson's-like shaking that can be so severe by age 25 that victims can't feed or dress themselves.

Inhalants also can kill in an instant, throwing the user into cardiac arrest or literally suffocating them, experts say.

Exact numbers of deaths aren't known; such data generally hasn't been tracked.

But "whether you're using for the first time or the 100th time," warns Julie Johnson, the Illinois director to the National Association of School Nurses, "you're kind of playing Russian Roulette."

Trevor was a lucky one.

He's proudly sober now -- he finally tired of screwing up his life, he confides -- and graduated Sunday from John Hersey High School, though he still has nagging flashbacks when he catches a whiff of deodorant spray. He asked that only his first name be used as he tried to leave that phase of his life behind.

The Alliance for Consumer Education has begun to record the number of those who die instead of getting sober, and Executive Director Colleen Creighton says she's been surprised so far with the victims: A man in his 40s. A 6-year-old who inhaled from a backyard propane tank.

In 2002, a Buffalo Grove teen died after inhaling butane lighter fluid.

In 2005, Jeff Williams lived the nightmare.

As an Ohio police sergeant married to a nurse -- the family pet was a retired drug dog -- Williams vowed he'd never let drugs in his home. He didn't think of inhalants, even after his son Kyle, 14, admitted to taking canisters of computer cleaning solution and complained later of a sore tongue and sickness -- a telltale sign.

Williams had no clue.

Kyle later was found dead in his bed, the red straw from the computer cleaner dangling from his lips and the canister between his legs.

He'd learned to huff, police later found out, only weeks before. He told his friends it really wouldn't hurt him.

Couldn't.

"If it can happen in my house, it can happen in anybody's house," said Jeff Williams, who was in Chicago last week for the launch of Illinois' inhalant prevention initiative. "This is something you have to know about. You can't say, 'It's not my kid.'"