Survey: Teens 'Huff' More, Fret Less Over Risks

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Inhalant abuse, known as "sniffing" or "huffing," appears to be increasing among teens, and shifting attitudes about the practice are cause for alarm, according to the Partnership for a Drug-Free America.

In a new survey of 7,200 7th-12th graders, about 23% reported abusing inhalants. That's up about 2% since 2001, according to the Partnership, which conducts such surveys annually. The most recent survey—the 2005 Partnership Attitude Tracking Study—was conducted from March through June 2005 and has a margin of error of ± 1.5%.

Of particular concern is that the percentage of teens reporting that they "strongly agree" that inhalant abuse can be deadly declined 19% since 2001, with only 64% of respondents in the 2005 survey agreeing that inhalants can kill.

"What stands out is the teens' decreasing perception of risk, because that often correlates with increases in use. We clearly need to address underlying attitudes and help teens understand the dangers associated with this form of substance abuse," Steve Pasierb, president and CEO of the Partnership said in a written statement.

Substances commonly used for huffing include spray paint, glue, computer duster, cooking spray, and correction fluid. Sniffing highly concentrated amounts of vapors from some products can cause a syndrome known as "sudden sniffing death," which can result after even a single session of inhalant use. Chronic exposure to inhalants can also cause damage to the brain, heart, lungs, liver, and kidneys.

Educational campaigns about the dangers of inhalant abuse also must target parents, who according to the Partnership report are either not aware or are in denial about the prevalence of inhalant abuse among teens. Of 1,200 parents of teens who were also surveyed, only 5% believe their child ever abused inhalants; teens are four times more likely to report inhalant abuse than parents expect.

Similar campaigns in the 1990s were effective for reducing inhalant abuse; between 1995 and 2001, data suggested these programs led to an increase from 64% to 79% in the proportion of teens who perceived inhalant abuse as risky, and inhalant abuse declined significantly during that period, from 23% to 18%. ■

Screen Patients With Panic Attacks For Drinking Issues

MIAMI — Higher self-reported alcohol consumption among men with panic attacks carries important implications for patient screening, according to a poster presentation at the annual conference of the Anxiety Disorders Association of America.

"The take-home message for physicians is to look for comorbidity in men with panic attacks for alcohol use and other substances," Erin Marshall said in an interview.

Previous research indicated a relationship between panic attacks and drinking behaviors. "It could be a coping mechanism—people with panic attacks drink more than people without panic attacks," said Ms. Marshall, doctoral student in clinical psychology at the University of Vermont at Burlington.

To assess associations between panic attacks, alcohol consumption, and gender, Ms. Marshall and her colleagues studied 413 college students in Mexico City. One of the collaborators, Samuel J. Cardenas, Ph.D., of the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico, facilitated recruitment of participants.

A total of 61% of participants were female. Each student completed self-report measures about substance use patterns and panic attack history.

"We found men with panic are drinking the most," Ms. Marshall said.

As predicted, individuals experiencing panic attacks were significantly more likely to drink alcohol (*P* less than .01), as were males (*P* less than .001). In addition, "the interaction of panic attacks and gender incrementally predicted levels of alcohol consumption (*P* less than .001), such that the association between panic attacks and alcohol consumption was stronger in men than women," the authors wrote.

—Damian McNamara