

Talk to your kids about huffing (again)

With social media influencing kids now more than ever, it's a good idea to recap the dangers

It's nothing new. But in today's digital age it's something young people may be exposed to more.

We're talking about sniffing products like paint, markers or nail polish for a temporary high. You might hear it called huffing, chroming or, in the medical community, inhalant abuse.

Health care providers like Justin Rapoff, DO, an emergency medicine physician who sees patients at OSF HealthCare, are again reminding parents about the serious health impacts of this activity and what to do if your child shows symptoms. It's especially important for kids to steer clear, he says, because their organs are still developing. An interruption to that development could mean trouble. Young people can also be more susceptible to peer pressure, giving in when other kids tell them to try something.

"Inhalant abuse is common because these are things that are easily found in your house, Dr. Rapoff adds. "They're underneath your kitchen sink and in your garage and bathroom. These are cheap and easy to find for kids."

The consequences

There are short and long-term effects of inhalant abuse, Dr. Rapoff says. Among the short-term issues is the general haze the activity will put you in. If you have to, for example, drive a vehicle while under the influence, you could crash or face legal consequences. If you're intoxicated at work or school, your performance will decline.

"You can have cognitive difficulties and even dementia [later in life]," Dr. Rapoff adds of the long-term impacts. "You can have bone marrow suppression and anemia. You can have abnormal coordination."

Cardiac arrest, when the heart stops beating suddenly, is also possible.

What parents can do

If your child shows signs of intoxication – slurred speech, nausea, confusion and a lack of balance are big ones – call 9-1-1 and get them to the emergency department.

"Inhalants hit similar receptors to those hit by alcohol. It causes a similar intoxication, which lasts around two to 30 minutes," Dr. Rapoff says.

That means you should get the child checked out even if they say they feel better. Dr. Rapoff says providers will likely test the person's blood, urine and heart. There's no bonafide treatment for inhalant abuse, Dr. Rapoff says. Rather, providers will treat the symptoms. For example, if the child feels nauseous or is vomiting, providers may give an anti-nausea medication.

What about avoiding an unpleasant trip to the hospital in the first place? Dr. Rapoff encourages parents to talk with their kids about the risks of huffing and, generally, any emotional issues they are dealing with. The young ones may be turning to inhalants to cope. In fact, Dr. Rapoff says studies have shown that when young people abuse inhalants, they are more likely to use heroin or even commit suicide later in life.

Parents should also pay attention to kids' behavior, especially if they make unexplained purchases of things like hairspray or whipped cream canisters. Keep items that could be misused out of reach. Put things like markers and cosmetics out only when it's time to use them. Keep things like spray paint and gasoline canisters locked up in the garage.