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Solvents are easy to obtain, abuse

Erin Pentelechuk
News Staff
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It could be wet or dry, huffed or bagged, but according to one Canadian expert, the latest multi-purpose drug could clean the floors or kill those who inhale it.

Colleen Dell, senior research associate with the Canadian Centre of Substance Abuse, said that although many parents watch out for the signs of addiction to street drugs like marijuana and cocaine in their children, the greatest danger is what they buy at the grocery store.

"There's so many other chemicals in the household that can have the same effect (as drugs like marijuana) and the scariest effect is that you can die the first time you use it," Dell said. "They are household things, they are not things we tell people about like marijuana. There's just not a lot of awareness about it."

Solvent abuse, characterized as the deliberate inhalation of fumes for the intoxicating and mind-altering effects, is nearly impossible to track because the products can be purchased by anyone at any age at the corner store, Dell said.

Cooking spray, computer cleaner, hair spray, paint, nail polish remover and felt tip markers are only a few examples of the products that Dell said youth predominately around age 12-15 are using to get high. The damage is extensive, including damage to the central nervous system, the blood and the brain.

"It goes directly into the bloodstream and therefore directly to the brain," Dell said. "It really does a lot to the body in a short amount of time."

An e-mail that has been circulated since around 2005 tells the story of a 14-year-old boy, Kyle, who died after inhaling a computer dusting product. The boy thought the product was harmless because it was compressed air.

"A boy who lives down the street from us showed Kyle how to do this about a month before (he died). Kyle showed his best friend, and told him it was cool and it couldn't hurt you," Kyle's father wrote in the e-mail.

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Dell said the story rings true for many solvent abuse cases. She said that kids show other kids and then curiosity kicks in. This situation, which she calls experimentation, is different from children who are sniffing glue in Third World countries, a category unto itself.

"In Third World countries and for those dealing with terrible home lives and are looking for escape, it is a coping mechanism," Dell said. "For others it's about peer pressure, experimentation and curiosity."

"There's a huge lack of understanding," she said. "It always surprises me that solvent abuse is something that could be fatal on the first use and has all these health effects on the body, but we don't pay much attention to it."

Const. Wally Henry with the Strathcona County RCMP said that because solvent abuse isn't what police spend the most time dealing with, it often flies under the radar with the public. He said that whether parents are concerned about their kids abusing solvents or abusing cocaine, they should take the same kinds of precautions.

"It's just another form of substance abuse. I think it comes down to the same thing as preventing any other kind of drug abuse and that is to know what your kids are doing and that's something that in some of the cases that we see isn't happening," Henry said. "The parents are not aware of what their kids are doing and think that nothing will happen to them."

Although Dell agrees that it is important to know where your kids are and what they are doing, she thinks there is a bigger message to share with kids.

"We need to be teaching kids about respecting the body with what we're ingesting. That includes food, medicine or anything else," Dell said. "It there's not an awareness that this is harmful and could potentially kill you, kids will just keep on doing it."

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