



Department of  
Education

**Shaping the future**

# Addressing volatile substance use (VSU) in school communities

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# Contents

<b>Introduction</b> .....	4
<b>What is volatile substance use?</b> .....	4
<b>What are volatile substances?</b> .....	4
<b>Effects of volatile substances</b> .....	5
<b>Identifying volatile substance use</b> .....	5
<b>Risks of harm from volatile substance use</b> .....	6
<b>Why people use volatile substances</b> .....	6
<b>Prevalence of volatile substance use</b> .....	7
<b>Patterns of use</b> .....	7
<b>Volatile substances and the law</b> .....	8
<b>Nitrous oxide ('nangs') and the law</b> .....	8
<b>Reducing supply</b> .....	8
<b>Education and support</b> .....	8
<b>Responding to and reporting a volatile substance use issue</b> .....	9
<b>A whole-of-community response</b> .....	10
<b>Contact details</b> .....	10
<b>Acknowledgement</b> .....	10
<b>Appendices</b> .....	11
<b>VSU INCIDENT MANAGEMENT – PROCESS 1</b> .....	12
<b>VSU INCIDENT MANAGEMENT – PROCESS 2</b> .....	13
<b>VSU INTERVENTION SUPPORT – PROCESS 3</b> .....	15

## Introduction

This resource provides information about volatile substances and volatile substance use (VSU). The content will assist staff to respond appropriately when concerns exist about the use of volatile substances by students in the school community. Information provided will assist staff to:

- develop greater understanding of what volatile substances are and the types of products in which they are found;
- increase knowledge around VSU and the potential impacts of use;
- understand best practice for provision of education and support to students in relation to VSU;
- gain knowledge of how to reduce the risks of harm to students who are using volatile substances;
- understand the need for a targeted approach to support students who use or are at risk of using volatile substances and the processes to follow to ensure appropriate responses and targeted support provision to these students;
- be clear on what makes a whole-of-community response to VSU, the benefits of this and how schools can contribute; and
- know where and how to access specialist external support when VSU is suspected or occurring in school communities.

## What is volatile substance use?

VSU is the deliberate inhalation of substances which produce a vapour or gas at room temperature for their intoxicating effects. VSU is commonly referred to as 'sniffing', 'solvent use', 'inhalant use' or 'chroming'.

Volatile substances can be soaked on a cloth, squeezed or sprayed into a plastic bag or poured into a bottle and then breathed in through the nose or the mouth. Some VSU products may be used directly from its container, e.g. butane or deodorant cans that are sprayed directly into the mouth.

## What are volatile substances?

Many household and industrial products contain chemicals (volatile substances) that can be inhaled to cause intoxication. Most volatile substances have legitimate uses and can be purchased legally from supermarkets, hardware stores, petrol stations and newsagencies. They can also be found in homes, businesses and on industrial sites.

Volatile substances are often classified into four categories:

1. Solvents;
2. Aerosols;
3. Gases; and
4. Nitrites.

Categories of volatile substances and examples of products in which they are found.

Category	Product types in which these are found
<b>Solvents</b> Liquids or semi-solids that vaporise at room temperature, eg toluene, xylene.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nail polish and nail polish remover</li> <li>• Paint thinners and paint strippers</li> <li>• Sealants</li> <li>• Petrol</li> <li>• Felt-tip marker pens</li> <li>• Correction fluids and thinners</li> <li>• Dry cleaning fluids</li> <li>• Glues – superglue, modelling glue, industrial glue</li> </ul>
<b>Aerosols</b> Sprays that contain solvents and/or hydrocarbon propellants, eg butane, propane.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Spray paints</li> <li>• Deodorant</li> <li>• Hairspray</li> <li>• Fly spray</li> <li>• Air fresheners</li> <li>• Vegetable oil cooking spray</li> <li>• Oven cleaner</li> </ul>
<b>Gases</b> Household and commercial products that contain gas fuels (eg butane) and gases used as medical anaesthetics (eg nitrous oxide).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cigarette lighter fuel refills</li> <li>• Butane gas cartridges (for portable cooking stoves)</li> <li>• Cylinder propane gas</li> <li>• Bottled domestic gas</li> <li>• Whipped cream gas bulbs ('nangs')</li> </ul>
<b>Nitrites</b> Strong smelling liquids that may contain any one of a range of nitrites, eg amyl nitrite, butyl nitrite.	Amyl nitrite ('poppers') are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• sometimes sold illegally for the specific purpose of inhalation and marketed as leather cleaner or liquid incense; and</li> <li>• sometimes used as a medication and requires a prescription for possession and use.</li> </ul>

## Effects of volatile substances

Volatile substances have a depressant effect on the central nervous system, slowing bodily functions such as heart rate and breathing. Effects are felt quickly as the chemicals are absorbed through the lungs, enter the bloodstream and are dispersed to the brain and other parts of the body. As with any other drug, volatile substances can affect a person's thinking, feelings and behaviour. Use can produce an intense experience that usually only lasts for a few minutes which can lead to continuing inhalation to keep the 'buzz' going.

Volatile substance intoxication is similar to alcohol intoxication with experience of reduced inhibitions and feelings of relaxation that can progress to drowsiness/sedation, dizziness, nausea, vomiting, impaired judgement and impaired coordination. Some people also report that they experience hallucinations. High dose use can result in disorientation, convulsions, seizures, loss of consciousness and death.

## Identifying volatile substance use

Staff may be aware of a student or group of students who are engaging in the use of volatile substances. Evidence or signs of use could include empty product containers (aerosols, nitrous oxide bulbs), rags/cloth smelling strongly of solvents, plastic bags or containers with residue of paint, glue or petrol.

While there is no definitive list of signs and symptoms of volatile substance intoxication, there are some indicators which may alert you to someone being intoxicated on volatile substances.

Some of these indicators include (but are not limited to):

- reduced inhibitions
- sedation
- slurred speech
- blurred vision
- bloodshot eyes
- flushed looking skin (similar to after exercise)
- hyper-salivation
- poor coordination
- impaired judgement
- nausea/vomiting
- dizziness
- disorientation/confusion
- agitation/aggression
- hallucinations/delusions
- central nervous system depression – slowed breathing and heart rate

The person may also report headaches, diarrhoea, abdominal pain, tinnitus (ringing in the ears) and palpitations. In high doses the person is at risk of delirium, convulsions/seizures, respiratory depression, cardiac arrhythmia/arrest, loss of consciousness, coma and death.

There are a number of other factors which can produce signs and symptoms similar to those listed above, caution is advised before assuming VSU as the casual factor. For example, similar behaviours may be due to a physical or medical condition such as an acquired brain injury, infection, poisoning, epilepsy, stroke, diabetes or other drug use; or a psychological or emotional state such as depression, anxiety, stress or grief.

## **Risks of harm from volatile substance use**

Harms from VSU in the short and long term include:

- accidents such as falling, drowning, burns and motor vehicle accidents;
- physical harms from ongoing or chronic use including damage to the kidneys, liver, heart, lungs and the brain;
- effects on the brain that can lead to cognitive impairment and difficulties with attention, short-term memory, problem solving, hearing, vision, speech, feeling and movement; and
- death due to toxic effects, suffocation, inhalation of vomit, fire or explosion, respiratory depression and cardiac arrest ('sudden sniffing death').

## **Why people use volatile substances**

For most people, reasons for using volatile substances are similar to those for using alcohol or any other drugs. However, volatile substances may be particularly attractive to some people because they are cheap, easily accessible, legal and have a fast onset of action. As with any drug, there are many reasons why people may engage in volatile substance use, some of which include:

- rapid intoxication;
- fun and excitement;
- curiosity;
- defying authority;
- alleviation of boredom; and
- connection with a group.

VSU may also be a symptom of broader and complex personal and social issues including:

- emotional distress and frustration;
- social and economic marginalisation;
- problematic family and personal relationships;
- homelessness; and
- hunger due to lack of availability of food.

## Prevalence of volatile substance use

Research indicates most VSU commonly occurs among young people from the ages of 12 to 16 years, and steadily decreases with age. The majority of people cease use after a short period of time with only a small minority continuing on to long-term or chronic use.

Volatile substance use tends to:

- be highly localised occurring in pockets around metropolitan, regional and remote areas;
- be cyclical and episodic;
- occur amongst all population groups; and
- be most common in those under 18 years of age.

Statistics on the prevalence of VSU is known to be inadequate due to difficulties in capturing accurate data. As VSU is not a criminal offence, presentations to the criminal justice system that may be related to VSU are often not recorded as such. Similarly, deaths and hospitalisations that may be a consequence of VSU, are often attributed to and recorded as consequences of other conditions or presentations.

It is important to note that the prevalence of VSU is low compared to the use of other substances such as alcohol and cannabis. However, VSU can be highly visible and have a significant impact on services and communities.

## Patterns of use

Patterns of use for individuals who use volatile substances are commonly described as experimental, social or chronic. Experimental use is characterised by one-off or a few occasions of use due to curiosity or peer influence. It is often opportunistic and short-lived.

Social use occurs more regularly within the context of a group activity. Chronic use is often long-term, may involve dependent, daily use, drug-seeking behaviours and poly-drug use. It is often associated with familial, social and/or psychological problems, many of which precede the use of volatile substances.

## Volatile substances and the law

Possession and use of volatile substances is not illegal in WA as volatile substance products are not illegal substances. However, it is illegal to sell or supply intoxicants, including volatile substances, to people likely to use them for the purpose of intoxication.

There are also laws which allow police to confiscate volatile substances and move minors to a safe place if they are deemed to be intoxicated or at-risk.

Nitrous oxide ('nangs') and the law Nitrous oxide for non-therapeutic (medical) use is scheduled in the national Poisons Standard as a Schedule 6 (S6) poison. Wholesale and retail suppliers are only able to legally sell S6 nitrous oxide if:

- the purchaser is aged 16 years or older;
- products are labelled and packaged as a 'poison' with the following warning statements: "Do not intentionally inhale contents" and "WARNING – May cause irreversible nerve damage if inhaled".

In response to the harms caused through increased availability and use of nitrous oxide, the Western Australian Government introduced further regulatory supply controls. [For more information, visit the Nitrous oxide supply restrictions webpage on the Department of Health website.](#)

## Reducing supply

An integral part of any community response to VSU is a range of measures aimed at limiting access to volatile substances, particularly to young people. Police have a key role in supply reduction through the policing of illegal supplies but can also play a vital role in the restriction of availability from sources such as retail, industry and tourists. Schools can contribute to supply reduction strategies by informing police of the volatile substances that are being used most commonly by their students when completing a VSU incident report form.

## Education and support

From a best practice point of view, schools should only provide education around VSU in the context of intervention support. This is best provided either one-to-one or in small groups with those identified as using or being at risk of using these substances. Local agencies with appropriately trained staff can support schools with the provision of intervention support. The processes for engaging with relevant support is outlined below in 'Processes for Responding to VSU.'

It is important that schools do not engage in broad, classroom-based prevention education about VSU nor make direct reference to volatile substances as potential drugs of intoxication for risk of promoting awareness of easily accessible substances and their psychoactive effects.

The Department of Education's Challenges and Choices classroom resources introduce content on volatile substances only in the early years and in the context of hazardous substances and poisons. Content includes education on intended purpose, safe storage and potential risks of harm.

This content does not indicate the psychoactive effects of these substances in order to avoid raising awareness of volatile substances as potential drugs of intoxication. The purpose of this educational content is to help young children understand and identify the dangers of poisons/hazardous substances.



Challenges and Choices does not continue to focus on hazardous substances and poisons beyond the early years. Education on these in the context of addressing volatile substances and their possible use as drugs of intoxication should only be provided in a targeted approach for those identified as in need of intervention support. Relevant resources to support education in this context are provided below. Work with the content that fits the student's level of ability by considering their age, level of literacy, level of understanding and possible cognitive deficits.

VSU specific educational resources to prevent and reduce risks of harm (available through Menzies School of Health Research [www.menzies.edu.au](http://www.menzies.edu.au)):

- Sniffing and the Brain
- When Boys and Men Sniff
- When Girls and Women Sniff

Alcohol and other drug (AOD) prevention education resources to build resilience and prevent and reduce risks of harm (available through the Department of Education):

- Challenges and Choices (Kindergarten to Year 9)
- Drug Talk (Years 10 to 12)

Strong Spirit Strong Mind Program – Aboriginal Culturally secure resources (available through Mental Health Commission <https://strongspiritstrongmind.com.au/>)

## Responding to and reporting a volatile substance use issue

As volatile substances are found in many household products they are generally readily available, legal and inexpensive to buy, which can make them attractive to young people. Some students in school communities may choose to use them so it is important that staff know how to respond in order to reduce harm and provide support should there be concerns around VSU in the student population.

Staff should be aware not to agitate or startle students suspected of engaging in use of volatile substances, as chemicals in some of these products can affect the functioning of the heart. If a student is stressed, frightened or engages in heavy exercise during or soon after inhaling, this can lead to 'sudden sniffing death' (cardiac sensitisation resulting in cardiac arrhythmia/arrest).

Depending on circumstances, there are specific processes for appropriately responding to VSU in the school context, which outline actions to take to reduce risks of harm. Although the following processes are primarily focused on students and incidents that occur on school grounds/premises, these processes extend to students who are on school excursions, are in Vocational and Education Training (VET) settings or off-site but still under the care of your school.

The processes are:

- **[VSU INCIDENT MANAGEMENT – PROCESS 1:](#)**  
What to do if evidence of VSU is found on school grounds/premises.
- **[VSU INCIDENT MANAGEMENT – PROCESS 2:](#)**  
What to do if a student is found using volatile substances on school grounds/premises.
- **[VSU INTERVENTION SUPPORT – PROCESS 3:](#)**

How to support a student identified as having VSU-related risk factors.

## A whole-of-community response

The most effective way to address VSU is through a whole-of-community response. This allows VSU and associated issues to be addressed more broadly and at a local level.

Each region in WA (with the exception of the metropolitan area) has an identified Central Coordinating Agency (CCA) that follows established protocols to promote the collection of information about local VSU prevalence and ensure a timely and coordinated response to VSU incidents.

The CCA, most often the local Community Alcohol and Drug Service (CADS), is the point of contact with whom all schools should liaise for reporting and coordination of responses to VSU incidents and issues in the school community.

To obtain contact details of the CCA or to download the VSU Incident Report Form for your region, visit the [Mental Health Commission's](https://vsu.mhc.wa.gov.au/vsu-in-wa/working-groups-in-wa) website (<https://vsu.mhc.wa.gov.au/vsu-in-wa/working-groups-in-wa>).

The CCA will coordinate a response with other stakeholders and agencies required to contribute to a broader coordinated response at a local level. As part of the broader response, where relevant the CCA may guide the school's involvement with:

- local police (supply reduction, community liaison, support in dealing with intoxication);
- community health, mental health and youth services; and
- child protection services.

Some locations in WA have formed VSU and/or AOD working groups involving a range of service providers that implement broad supply, demand and harm reduction strategies to reduce and prevent harms from VSU and AOD use. To find out if there are any active VSU/AOD working groups in your area/region, see <https://vsu.mhc.wa.gov.au/vsu-in-wa/working-groups-in-wa>

When schools become part of a local VSU/AOD working group they become part of the whole-of-community response and gain better understanding of the strategies and services that can support them in addressing VSU issues in the school community.

Remember, when concerns exist about suspected VSU, following the school's processes for managing incidents and providing support interventions as noted above ensures accurate and timely incident reporting and necessary referral beyond the school to the CCA. This then allows provision of specialist support from local services.

## Contact details

Road Safety and Drug Education branch  
Department of Education  
9402 6415  
[rsde.rfa@education.wa.edu.au](mailto:rsde.rfa@education.wa.edu.au)

## Acknowledgement

This resource was developed in collaboration with the Mental Health Commission. More information about volatile substance use can be found at <https://vsu.mhc.wa.gov.au>.

## Appendices

All resources are available to download from:  
[myresources.education.wa.edu.au/vsu](https://myresources.education.wa.edu.au/vsu)

[VSU INCIDENT MANAGEMENT - PROCESS 1](#)

[VSU INCIDENT MANAGEMENT - PROCESS 2](#)

[VSU INTERVENTION SUPPORT - PROCESS 3](#)

# VSU INCIDENT MANAGEMENT – PROCESS 1

## Where evidence of VSU is found on school grounds/premises

This process is to be followed only where evidence of VSU is found.

### Evidence of VSU may include:

- Discarded VSU products in unusual places or in large quantities.
- Clothing, towels or rags smelling strongly of chemicals.
- Bottles, containers or plastic bags with residue of products such as paint, glue or petrol.

Should an incident occur where student/s are found using volatile substances, follow [Process 2 VSU INCIDENT MANGEMENT Student/s found using volatile substances on school grounds/premises](#).

*Staff must follow Department/School/OSH Policies and procedures at all times.*

### 1. Document the incident as relevant to school procedure

It is a good idea to document what, how much, where and when the volatile substances were found.

### 2. Dispose of VSU paraphernalia safely or store it securely (if safe to do so)

- Be aware of flammable substances and never handle or move a product that you think may cause you harm.
- Be aware of volatile substances that have been used in enclosed areas. Ensure adequate ventilation.
- If safe to do so, store the volatile substance for identification purposes in a secure location. This may give the school and the Central Coordinating Agency (CCA) a better understanding of the items that were found and further actions needed. Consult the Departments 'Manage disposal of unwanted chemicals' if in doubt.
- If not storing the volatile substance, take a photo and discard the volatile substance safely.

### 3. Notify the school Principal of the volatile substance/s found

### 4. Principal or other relevant staff member reporting actions:

Complete and submit a [VSU Incident Report Form](#) (found on the Mental Health Commission website). Information on this form **should not include** identifying student information. You can request VSU support from your local CCA by submitting this form.

### 5. The CCA will contact the school to:

- **discuss** and verify the details of the incident with the staff member that submitted the report.
- **provide guidance** over the phone and discuss required actions and relevant support options.
- **link** the school in with specialist services if necessary.
- **follow-up** with the school with regard to any agreed school-based actions and review the effectiveness of the response and support provided.

### 6. Should a student or students be identified as requiring intervention support, follow [VSU INTERVENTION SUPPORT PROCESS 3: Supporting student/s who have been identified as having VSU-related risk factors](#).

## VSU INCIDENT MANAGEMENT – PROCESS 2

### Student/s found using volatile substances on school grounds/premises

#### 1. Ensure safety of staff and student/s

- Increase ventilation if in a confined environment.
- Try to keep the student/s calm and avoid agitating or startling them to reduce the likelihood of sudden sniffing death (cardiac sensitisation resulting in cardiac arrhythmia/arrest).
- Seek help from other school staff and have them inform the Principal.
- Be aware of flammable substances and never handle or move a product that you think may cause you harm. If unable to reduce risk, contact police for support before continuing to address the situation.
- Request that the student/s hand over the volatile substance if safe to do so. This includes combustible materials like matches and cigarettes.
- If safe to do so, store the volatile substance for identification purposes in a secure location. This may give the school and the Central Coordinating Agency (CCA) a better understanding of the items that were found and further actions needed. Consult the Department of Education's 'Manage disposal of unwanted chemicals' policy if in doubt.
- If not storing the volatile substance, take a photo and discard the volatile substance safely.
- Take the student/s to rest in a quiet and safe space and provide food and water only if/when alert.
- Proceed with the school's medical procedures and monitor the student/s closely.
- If possible, establish: how they feel, which volatile substances were taken, how much, how long ago, by what method, and who else might be involved or in need of help.
- Contact the parent to explain the situation and arrange for them to collect the student if it is not a medical emergency

#### 2. When concern for health escalates

- In the event of a medical emergency (e.g. person is non-responsive, losing consciousness, not breathing normally, seriously injured or having a seizure), call an ambulance on 000 (Triple Zero) and provide basic first aid
- **Notify** the parent as soon as practicable.
- If the parent requests for the ambulance to be cancelled, the request should not be actioned. The school has a duty of care for the student and arrangements for transport by ambulance should proceed.
- Provide ambulance staff with the volatile substance that has been confiscated and relay any additional information.
- Record and document the incident as per relevant school procedure.

#### 3. Principal (or relevant staff member) to guide further actions to work forward

- Explain to the student/s (once recovered) the immediate actions that will follow to keep them safe.
- Inform relevant staff of the incident and actions to follow while adhering to the school's confidentiality requirements.
- Provide parents or caregivers with information about where to access support for themselves.

#### 4. Record and document incident and details obtained as relevant to school procedure

5. **Principal or other relevant staff member reporting actions:**

Complete and submit a [VSU Incident Report Form](#) (found on the Mental Health Commission website). Information on this form **should not include** identifying student information. You can request VSU support from your local CCA by submitting this form.

6. **The CCA will contact the school to:**

- **discuss** and verify the details of the incident with the staff member that submitted the report.
- **provide guidance** over the phone and discuss required actions and relevant support options.
- **link** the school to specialist services where necessary.
- **follow-up** with the school in regard to any agreed school-based actions and review the effectiveness of the response and support provided.

Note: Avoid giving broad classroom education to students about VSU. This can increase harm as it may provide students (who were not aware of VSU) information on the availability and psychoactive effects that volatile substances can produce.

## VSU INTERVENTION SUPPORT – PROCESS 3

### Supporting student/s who have been identified as having VSU-related risk factors

Student/s identified as requiring intervention support may have come to the attention of a teacher or school staff member because:

- An incident of use was observed;
- An issue was raised following concerns about indicators of use;
- An association with discarded VSU products has been disclosed;
- The person is or has been associated with people known to use volatile substances;
- A student has disclosed VSU.

**1. Principal or other relevant staff member to:**

Complete and submit a [VSU Incident Report Form](#) (found on the Mental Health Commission website). Information on this form **should not include** identifying student information. You can request VSU support from your local CCA by submitting this form.

**2. The CCA will contact the school to:**

- Discuss and verify the information submitted in the VSU Incident Report.
- Provide or link the school with agencies that can assist with:
  - one-to-one or small group targeted support,
  - telephone or online support for students (where available),
  - guidance to relevant school staff to support their provision of one-to-one, small group targeted support interventions and ongoing school-based support for the student/s involved.

**3. Principal or relevant staff member to liaise with parents/caregivers**

Inform the student/s parents/caregivers of concerns around VSU, any actions taken and intentions for ongoing support provision, including information on where to access support for themselves, e.g. Parent and Family Drug Support Line (08) 9442 5050 (Metro) or 1800 653 203 (Country).

**4. Actively assist students to remain engaged with the school**

- Help student/s to identify alternative interests to promote engagement at school and enhance connections with students that are not using volatile substances.
- Provide breakfast clubs or equivalent to alleviate hunger where this is a trigger to use volatile substances.
- Consider constructive consequences for students who use volatile substances to increase a sense of connection and achievement. Provided the student/s have not been using volatile substances, and therefore are not at risk of harm through physical exertion, these could include clearing up school grounds, assisting with gardening and classroom tidying.

Note: Avoid giving broad education to students about VSU. This can increase harm as it may provide students (who were not aware of VSU) information on the availability and psychoactive effects that volatile substances can produce.