

Solvent abuse

A guide for retailers



**SOLVENT
ABUSE
CAN KILL
INSTANTLY**

The problem of solvent abuse

The use of drugs and solvents is a big problem in Northern Ireland. Solvent abuse involves inhaling some household and industrial products to achieve intoxication. Many of these products can be bought in your shop.

Although scientists have tried, so far it hasn't been possible to stop abuse of these products by changing the formulation, changing the container design, or including an unpleasant additive, but controls on the sales of these products to young people can help. This booklet will help you comply with the laws and understand the reasons behind them. It tells you about the problem and what you and your staff need to do to uphold the law and protect young people.

What is it?

Some people call it 'glue sniffing'; but many different household products can be used – not only glues and solvents. 'Sniffing' isn't strictly accurate either, because the vapours are inhaled through the mouth as well as the nose. 'Volatile substance abuse' (VSA) is the technical term for using any kind of volatile substance (ie one that gives off fumes at room temperature) to get intoxicated.

Sniffing is very dangerous. Deaths occur unpredictably – even the first sniff could be someone's last. Most of those who die are teenagers. Heroin and Ecstasy can kill, but more teenagers die from sniffing solvents than from abuse of all the illegal drugs. There have been 82 sniffing-related deaths in Northern Ireland since 1971, and the latest figures show five deaths in Northern Ireland in the year 2003. In the UK as a whole there is, on average, one death per week (51 in 2003).

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What products are abused?

Anything that contains a volatile hydrocarbon is potentially abusable. These include:

- butane gases (especially cigarette lighter refill cans);
- certain kinds of glues;
- many types of aerosol sprays.

There are many other products, including correction fluids, dry cleaning fluid, spot remover and some shoe and metal polishes. Recently, butane gas lighter refills have been the biggest killer. That's why there is a complete ban on the sale of these to anyone under 18.



Many volatile substances carry the voluntary 'SACKI' warning: 'Solvent Abuse Can Kill Instantly'. But not all volatile substances have this warning.

Who does it?

All kinds of young people may try sniffing. In Northern Ireland in 2003 13% of 15 and 16 year olds are reported to have tried inhaling solvents. 'Hardcore' sniffers are rare, and generally have other problems in their lives, eg in their families or at school.

Don't try to identify sniffers by their appearance. Nothing obvious will distinguish sniffers from others. What you need to look for are signs of behaviour indicating that young people are buying substances to use them to sniff.

Why do young people sniff?

Sniffing can give a cheap and easily available 'high'. Sniffers say that it feels a bit like getting drunk; younger teenagers often try 'sniffing' when they don't have access to alcohol or illegal drugs. Hallucinations are an attraction for some.



What you need to do

- When they are experimenting, young people often sniff in small groups. So be alert for groups of young people buying volatile substances.
- Older sniffers are generally socially isolated, sniffing on their own. So be aware of individuals who buy frequently, who come back on the same day to buy a similar product, or who try to make multiple purchases.
- Watch out for young people who ask for plastic bags or carrier bags which they might use as containers for the volatile substance.
- Truants are more likely to abuse solvents than other young people. So watch out for young people who come into your shop when they should be at school.
- Don't assume that most sniffers are boys. Girls sniff as well.

Be sure of the law

You and your staff have a tricky job. Everyone understands that retailer vigilance is only a part of the solution to this difficult social problem. You can't do everything but you can do your bit to help. There are two laws that you must comply with:

- **The *Intoxicating Substances (Supply) Act 1985* makes it an offence for a person to supply or offer to supply to someone under the age of 18 “if he knows or has reasonable cause to believe that the substance or its fumes are likely to be inhaled... for the purpose of causing intoxication”.** The law doesn't give a list of substances, and the retailer must decide whether the young customer is going to abuse the product (see page 6 for some example situations).
- **Under the *Consumer Protection Act 1987* it is an offence to supply gas lighter refills to young people under the age of 18 years.** Unlike the *Intoxicating Substances (Supply) Act*, this applies to all sales to anyone under 18 whether or not you think the customer is going to abuse the product.

So you must refuse to sell any product that you think might be used by a young person to 'get high' AND you must not sell gas lighter refills to anyone under 18

The penalty for breaking either law is a maximum fine of £5,000 or up to six months imprisonment – or both

The two pieces of legislation require quite different actions:

- Normally, you will have no problems in selling products like hairspray to young people under 18. But you need to keep your wits about you and be aware that these products might be used to achieve intoxication.
- You must not sell gas lighter refills to anyone under 18.

Don't get a reputation as a shop that breaks the law. A clear policy, properly enforced, will reassure legitimate customers that you are a responsible retailer. You'll gain recognition in your community and have the satisfaction of knowing that you are helping to save young people's lives.

Steps you can take

First, make it clear to potential users of these products that you know the law and are prepared to enforce it:

- Put a sticker in the window saying that you reserve the right not to sell solvents. Use point-of-sale stickers on the till or counter, and place stickers where solvents are located in the store. A supply of these stickers has been enclosed with this leaflet.
- You might decide to keep some products under lock and key and only make them available if customers ask for them. Or you could get dummy cans of certain products, which people have to exchange for the real thing at the till. Ask your supplier about these.
- You might find it helpful to keep a logbook recording any sales you have refused.

Staff training is crucial – ensure your staff know the law and know how to refuse a customer who they think will misuse these products. Remember to train new staff. The training will need to:

- provide information about the legislation;
- develop skills to assertively refuse to sell a product – without giving offence.

The key skills are assertiveness and politeness. Staff will need to know what to do if they have trouble with a customer. Make sure they know that a senior member of staff will support their decision and explain to the customer why the sale is being refused.



Examples of when to use your judgement

Situation: A young woman apparently under the age of 18 comes to the till with a basket containing a loaf of bread, a carton of milk, a bag of crisps and a deodorant spray.

Advice: Allow the sale, unless you have other evidence of the possibility of abuse of this product.

Situation: Two young boys who you think are of primary school age (ie under the age of 11) come in giggling. They spend some time looking at the different deodorants before selecting one and bringing it to the till, where they pick up a chocolate bar as well.

Advice: Refuse the sale – it seems suspicious because of their behaviour and because they are not buying other items.

Situation: After you have refused to sell a product to a group of young people, you see that they are hanging around near the shop, asking other customers to buy the product for them. Eventually, an adult agrees to do this; he comes into the shop and asks for the product.

Advice: Refuse the sale if you think they are buying for someone else. You could point out to that person the dangers of the abuse of these products.

Situation: A young man who might be under the age of 18 asks for 20 cigarettes and a container of butane lighter refill.

Advice: Explain to him that you can't sell him the refill if he is under 18. If he protests that he is over 18, ask him if he has any proof of age. If he cannot produce proof, you must refuse the sale for you think he is underage.

Situation: A young woman, who is probably over 18 but you can't be sure, staggers in and asks for three cans of butane lighter refills, 'large size'.

Advice: Refuse the sale. It's best to be cautious. She almost certainly intends to abuse the product and you are not sure of her age.

Situation: An adult, known to you as a sniffer, tries to buy a sniffable substance.

Advice: He is over 18 so you are not bound by law to refuse to sell him a sniffable product. However, you may choose to refuse.

Handling difficult situations

Sometimes your refusal to sell a product will anger the customer. Here are some tips to avoid provoking a confrontation:

- **Refuse politely** and, if necessary, keep repeating your refusal: *"I'm sorry, but I can't sell you this."*
- **Stay calm**, look the customer in the eye and, if required, explain clearly but briefly why you are refusing.
- **Don't get into an argument.** Just keep repeating your polite refusal: *"The law doesn't allow me to sell this to you."*
- **Be consistent in your refusal.** Show the customer by your firm tone of voice, by your upright body posture, and your direct eye contact that you are not going to make the sale – the law is on your side and you are doing the right thing.
- **Draw the customer's attention** to the point-of-sale stickers indicating that sales of these substances will be refused: *"Look, these signs say that our shop won't sell these products to young people."*
- **Explain that it is the policy of the shop** not to sell these products to young people.
- **Refer to the law.** If necessary, explain that the law does not allow you to sell the product to them: *"If I sold you this, I would be breaking the law."*
- **Call your supervisor** (if you have one) for support.
- **Don't be swayed** by the customer's assertions that s/he is over 18. If you think that they are underage, they need to give you evidence of age, such as photo identification.

Further help and information

- **Re-Solv**, the Society for the Prevention of Solvent and Volatile Substance Abuse, offers advice and resources to help you deal with this problem. Telephone 028 9070 2493 or visit the website: www.re-solv.org
- **National Drugs Helpline** answers queries about all aspects of drug and substance abuse. Call free and in confidence on 0800 77 66 00.
- www.drugsalcohol.info is the first regional drugs and alcohol website for professionals in Northern Ireland and includes information on solvents.



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Adapted from a leaflet written by Richard Ives and published by the Health Education Authority in 1999.