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May 7, 2007

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Pursuit of a dangerous high puts teens at risk

Most parents know of the risks of adolescence and spend endless hours worrying about the safety of their children at that age. Teens, willing to take chances because they feel invincible, too frequently put themselves in harm's way. While parents worry about the highly publicized dangers of alcohol, cocaine, and other substance abuses, further perils often beckon. Some threats, however, are readily available, without regulation, and so irrational that unsuspecting parents may miss clues that could prevent a tragedy.

Many teens will do anything for the quick, lightheaded, pleasurable experience, known as a high or rush. That includes everything from inhaling toxic chemicals to playing the "choking game." Both of these activities can have long-term consequences and may lead to sudden death.

The May issue of Pediatrics reveals that one in 10 teens have abused inhalants. The list of common household products used is both perplexing and frightening. Solvents such as acetone, nail polish remover, correction fluid, felt-tip marker fluid, and glue represent a small proportion of the chemicals being abused. Others include whipping-cream aerosol, video-cassette-recorder cleaner, and liquid air freshener or room deodorizers. Who could have guessed?

Some of these products are inhaled by mouth (huffing) or through the nose (sniffing/snorting), while others are sprayed directly into the nose (glading). Often the chemicals are placed in paper or plastic bags, which are then placed over the nose or head (bagging), which greatly increases the danger.

In most cases, the effect of inhaling is similar to alcohol intoxication, with loss of inhibition followed by drowsiness. If used repeatedly, the toxic effects of inhaling increase and the abuser may feel dizzy and lightheaded before falling asleep. Prolonged use can have long-term neurological consequences, including memory loss and impaired movement. In addition to other physical consequences and the potential for accidents, a teen's heart rhythm may be disturbed, putting the teen at increased risk. Accurate mortality rates have yet

to be tallied, as public awareness is limited and the problem is not well studied.

The choking game, also called space cowboy, blackout, gasp, and space monkey is occurring with increased frequency. Frequently two or more youngsters play the game together, with one child choking another until the decrease in blood flow to the victim's brain causes a lightheaded feeling from lack of oxygen. Then, the real high begins when the choking hands or noose are loosened and blood and oxygen flood the brain, causing a rush.

Although this behavior is dangerous under any circumstance, it becomes even more so when the choking victim carries the activity out alone. Tightening a noose around their necks or placing a plastic bag over their faces, teens frequently pass out with no one present to rescue them. Risks include brain injury or heart attack. The number of deaths resulting from the choking game, however, is unclear, because many cases may be ruled as suicides.

Other than worry, what can a parent do?

- Be aware that these risks exist and can affect your child.
- Educate your children to the dangers involved.
- Monitor your house for the presence of unexpected chemicals.
- If your teen's behavior, school performance, or friends change, find out why.
- Get to know and enjoy your children.
- Maintain a close relationship and open communication with your teen.
- Find enjoyable activities of mutual interest to do together.

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