"DUSTING"

"A SHORTCUT TO DEATH"

People with addictions problems have been abusing inhalants for decades. These inhalants include gasoline, propane, model airplane glue - and a host of everyday substances that are being used in a deadly manner. But a new practice, known as “dusting” is putting an even more dangerous spin on the subject of inhalant abuse.

The practice gets its name from cans of Dust Off - a brand of compressed air that comes in a container and is used to blow dust off of computers. Users inhale directly from these cans in order to get a brief high. The contents of the cans come out under pressure - so dangerous and potentially toxic substances are being pushed into the lungs at a rapid rate.

Most of the people who try “dusting” are kids between the ages of 9 and 15. At that age, it’s hard for them to get their hands on street drugs. But anybody can purchase computer cleaning products, or simply use containers that other family members have left behind.

It's not just Dust-Off that can be used in this manner. Many other everyday products - such as hair spray, air freshener and aerosol whipped cream - can be abused through “dusting,” and the results have been fatal on a number of occasions.

Abusing inhalants can result in damage to many vital organs, such as the brain, heart, kidney and liver. But it certainly
doesn’t take repeated use before users run into serious problems. A single ‘try’ can disrupt heart rhythms and cause death from cardiac arrest. Even in a young and healthy person, “Sudden sniffing death” syndrome is the term for kids who die this way. It’s estimated that 22% of SSDs are first time users!

“Dusting” might also lower oxygen levels enough to cause death by suffocation. The gases that are inhaled are heavier than air, so victims slip into unconsciousness and die from lack of oxygen. Some of the chemical agents that are inhaled can also cause an allergic reaction which swells up the airways and leads to death by asphyxiation. These same chemicals might also induce nausea and cause a person to die from aspiration; a horrible ordeal where you choke to death on your own vomit.

Kyle Williams, one month before his death.

**One Family’s Tragedy**

An example of just how dangerous dusting can be occurred in March of 2005 when Kyle Williams, the 14-year-old son of a Cleveland police officer, was found dead in his bedroom with a can of Dust-Off next to his face. His father, officer Jeff Williams, used the product to help him clean off computers he was working on, and had no idea it could potentially prove dangerous.

A friend of Kyle’s introduced him to “dusting” about a month before he died. Kyle was under the impression that Dust-Off only contained compressed air, and couldn’t hurt him. Unfortunately, he was wrong. Dust-Off also contains a propellant - a gas that is heavier than air. People who use products like Dust-Off report feeling dizzy and getting a mild buzz. The propellant they are inhaling decreases the oxygen available to their brain and their heart.

Dusting isn’t like other forms of drug abuse. Users don’t start feeling bad and decide that maybe they’ve had too much of a substance. They often die immediately after breathing the product in because of a reaction to the propellant. If not, they may be dead with a couple of seconds of finishing the hit. In Kyle’s case, he was dead immediately from heart failure. The straw from the can of Dust-Off was still in his mouth, and his eyes were still open!
Easily Available

The scary thing about products used for “dusting” is the fact that they can be purchased openly in thousands of stores across North America. They are not like street drugs such as cocaine, heroin or crystal meth that have to be purchased illegally.

Officer Williams knew all about street drugs. He taught programs in Cleveland area schools that educated kids about the dangers of drugs. His wife is a nurse who is only too familiar with what happens after a drug overdose. The family also had a retired police dog that was trained to sniff out illegal drugs living in their home as a family pet. You would think that if any home was safe from the tragedy of a drug related death, theirs would have been that home. But none of them could possibly predict that their son, Kyle, would use such a seemingly harmless everyday product in such a dangerous manner.

The makers of Dust-Off advise consumers to keep the product out of reach of children, and to use it responsibly. They also issue warnings on their cans pointing out that “inhalant abuse is illegal and can cause permanent injury or be fatal.” Can we remove products like Dust-Off from the shelves so that they don’t pose a threat to children? Frankly, this isn’t a practical solution. There are simply too many products that can be misused this way.

The answer lies in educating children (and adults) about the potentially fatal side effects associated with “dusting” and with the misuse of inhalants. Kids take products in their home for granted, and just assume they are safe. They assume that “it can’t be dangerous if Mom and Dad just leave it lying around,” or “it can’t be dangerous if I am able to buy it in a corner store.” When these products are used the way they are designed to be used, they are harmless. But when they are ingested, they can prove fatal.

It’s important for parents to talk to their kids about the dangers of “dusting,” and for teachers and drug education instructors to warn about the potentially fatal side-effects. Many parents and teachers worry about putting ideas in their kids heads, so they don’t want to deal with the subject. But thanks to the internet, and to word of mouth, plenty of kids already know about “dusting.” They hear stories telling them how to get a safe and cheap high from everyday products. Now they need to know the truth - they need to learn that the “cheap high” they are looking for might well be their last!
**Warning Signs**

A few days prior to his death from “dusting,” Kyle complained to his father about his tongue hurting. This would have been caused by frostbite as the propellant comes out of the can at an extremely low temperature. Kyle’s father is still consumed by grief because he had no idea about what might have caused these symptoms.

If he’d known the warning signs, and had been able to intervene, perhaps his son would still be alive!

Recognizing when kids are using inhalants can help parents to discourage this incredibly dangerous activity. Some of the warning signs can include:

* Frostbite
* Chemical odours on breath or clothes
* Paint or other stains on face, hands or clothes
* Empty canisters hidden in their rooms
* Slurred speech and drunk or disoriented appearance
* Nausea or loss of appetite
* Inattentiveness and lack of motivation
* Irritability or depression