

Poppers (Amyl and Butyl Nitrite): A briefing paper for drug education practitioners

Purpose of the briefing

The aim of this briefing is twofold: provide information on poppers and support drug education practitioners and others who work with young people.

Who is the briefing for

The briefing will be of particular relevance to drug education practitioners and other practitioners working with young people, including:

- Teachers/tutors and other staff who deliver drug education
- Those with responsibility for co-ordinating drug education
- Head teachers/Principals
- Youth workers
- Connexions personal advisors
- And other providers of drug education.

The information in this briefing may also be of interest to those who provide pastoral support to young people including, counsellors, school nurses and Education Welfare Officers and drug treatment workers.

Terminology

Young people

For the purpose of this briefing 'young people' refers to those aged between 11 and 19.

Physical dependence

Physical dependence is a compulsion to continue taking a drug in order to feel good or to avoid feeling bad. This is done to avoid physical discomfort or withdrawal – like the shakes or flu like effects.

Psychological dependence

Psychological dependence is more common and can happen with any drug. The user can feel they cannot cope without drugs and may feel a compulsion to use a substance even though they may not be physically dependent.

Tolerance

Tolerance refers to the way the body gets used to the repeated presence of a drug, meaning that higher doses are needed to maintain the same effect.

About Poppers (Amyl, butyl and isobutyl nitrite)

Amyl nitrite was first produced in 1857 and originally used (from 1867) as a treatment for angina; other forms of treatment are now more usual. It was packaged in small glass capsules that were cracked open to release the vapour. The capsules popped when they were opened hence the name poppers. Amyl nitrite, butyl and isobutyl nitrite are collectively known as alkyl nitrites. They come as a clear, yellow, volatile and inflammable liquids with a sweet smell when fresh, but when stale the smell has been compared to that of 'dirty or smelly socks'.

As street drugs, alkyl nitrites (usually butyl nitrite) come in small bottles with screw or plug tops. They are available with different brand names including; Ram, Thrust, Rock Hard, Kix, TNT, Hardware and Liquid Gold. The substance can be inhaled straight from the bottle, a cloth, or anything absorbent, such as the end of an unlit cigarette. Poppers are commonly sold in clubs, joke shops, sex shops, gay bars, dance events, so-called 'head' shops (retailers of drug paraphernalia) and by mail order/internet.

Poppers are mainly used to loosen inhibitions and produce stimulation while dancing, as well as to enhance sexual activity. Poppers are also used to boost the effects of other stimulant drugs such as ecstasy.

The price of poppers is variable but usually costs between £2 - £5 a bottle.

Effects/risks

As soon as poppers are inhaled, the effects are virtually instant. There is an initial 'rush' to the head as the blood vessels dilate, heartbeat quickens and the blood rushes to the brain. As a result of this a pounding headache, dizziness, a flushed face and neck and light-headedness are commonly reported.

Some people use it to enhance sexual pleasure, as users claim it slows down sense of time and prolongs sensation of orgasm. Poppers can relax the body's soft muscle tissue and therefore may help relax anal sphincter muscles. Some users have also reported problems with achieving erection after use.

Other symptoms can include nausea, headache, weakness and cold sweats. There are cases of nitrite dermatitis, which can include a rash around the mouth, nose and cheeks, and this is sometimes accompanied by pain and swelling of the nasal passages, similar to sinusitis. This can clear in around ten days and only re-occurs with resumed use. A painful burning sensation occurs if the nitrite is spilled on the skin.

Are poppers addictive?

Physical or psychological dependency does not occur with using poppers. Although repeated use as a sex aid and stimulant is not uncommon.

Tolerance can develop within two or three weeks of regular use, but after a few days of abstinence, this tolerance is lost. The user can become particularly vulnerable to headaches if use is resumed.

What other adverse effects are associated with poppers?

Blood pressure is reduced rapidly which can cause unconsciousness, this is particularly dangerous if the user is lying down to inhale and then gets up quickly.

Excessive use can cause a reduction of oxygen in the blood, known as methaemoglobinaemia. Symptoms include: severe vomiting, blue-tinged skin and lips, shock and unconsciousness.

Poppers are toxic and if a large quantity is swallowed, as opposed to inhaled, it can lead to loss of consciousness. Some users have also died as a result of this.

Taking poppers is particularly dangerous if there is a history of heart trouble or other cardiovascular problems. It is dangerous for those who have anaemia and glaucoma.

Taking poppers alongside medication to reduce blood pressure or viagra can drop blood pressure to dangerously low levels.

Prevalence

“Use of poppers has traditionally been associated with the gay community. Its use however is much more widespread.” (DrugSearch, www.drugscope.org.uk)

- Four per cent of 16 to 24-year-olds had used poppers in England and Wales in 2002/03 (*Statistics on young people and drug misuse: England 2003, Statistical bulletin 2004/13*)
- Among 11to15-year-olds in England, 4% reported sniffing poppers in the last year in 2003, compared with 3% in 2001 and 4% in 2002 (*Drug use, smoking and drinking among young people in 2003*, Department of Health (DH) 2004)
- Among 11 to 15-year-olds, 12% had been offered poppers in 2003, compared to 6% in 1999 (*Drug use, smoking and drinking among young people in 2003*, DH 2004)
- One per cent of Year 8 males and 1% of Year 8 females report to having taken poppers (*Young people in 2003*, School Health Education Unit (SHEU) 2004)
- Six per cent of Year 10 males and 9% of Year 10 females report to having taken poppers (*Young people in 2003*, SHEU 2004)
- Nineteen per cent of Year 8 males and 13% of Year 8 females thought poppers is an unsafe drug (*Young people in 2003*, SHEU 2004)
- Twenty-nine per cent of Year 10 males and 25% of Year 10 females thought poppers is an unsafe drug (*Young people in 2003*, SHEU 2004)

Legal status

It is not illegal to use or possess poppers. In the UK amyl nitrite is classified as a pharmacy medicine under the Medicines Act 1968, but not butyl nitrite. Theoretically this means amyl nitrite is available from chemists without prescription, but as amyl is rarely used in medicine, very few pharmacists stock it.

Supply can be an offence. “There have been cases where the Medicines Act has been used to fine shops for selling them, but they are still sold as Room Aromas or Deodorisers in sex shops and some clubs.” (www.talktofrank.com).

Good practice in drug education

The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) published their revised guidance on drugs for schools *Drugs: Guidance for schools* (DfES 2004). Practitioners should refer to this document for guidance and support in planning and delivering drug education and supporting young people.

The document provides guidance on all matters relating to drug education, the management of drugs within the school community and school drug policy development.

Copies of the guidance can be downloaded from www.dfes.gov.uk/drugsguidance. Hard copies are available from DfES publications by calling 0845 602 2260, quoting reference number DfES/092/2004.

For practitioners working in further education institutions, it will be useful to also refer to *Drugs: Guidance for Further Education Institutions* (DrugScope and Alcohol Concern 2004). This document can be downloaded from DrugScope website www.drugscope.org.uk and Alcohol Concern website www.alcoholconcern.org.uk

Drugs: Guidance for schools (DfES 2004) states that the aim of drug education is to provide opportunities for all young people to develop their knowledge, skills and attitudes and understanding about drugs and appreciate the benefits of a healthy lifestyle, relating this to their own and others' actions. It states that drug education should:

- Increase knowledge and understanding and clarify misconceptions about:
 - The short and long term effects and risks of drugs
 - The rules and laws relating to drugs
 - The impact of drugs on individuals, families and communities
 - The prevalence and acceptability of drug use among peers
 - The complex moral, social, emotional and political issues surrounding drugs
- Develop personal and social skills to make informed decisions and keep themselves safe and healthy, including:
 - Assessing, avoiding and managing risk
 - Communicating effectively
 - Resisting pressures
 - Finding information, help and advice
 - Devising problem solving and coping strategies
 - Developing self awareness and self esteem
- To explore their own and other peoples' attitudes towards drugs, drug use and drug users, including challenging stereotypes, and exploring media and social influences

Any drug education for young people should be based on the young people's existing knowledge and understanding. All young people are likely to know something about drugs, although this knowledge may be inaccurate, incomplete

or based on myths. Suggestions on how to identify existing knowledge and understanding can be found in *Drugs: Guidance for schools* (DfES 2004), Section 3.1.1.

Poppers education

Drugs: Guidance for schools emphasises that drug education should include teaching about all drugs, including illegal drugs, alcohol, tobacco, volatile substances and over-the-counter and prescription medicines. “Pupils need to understand that all have the potential to cause harm; that using drugs in combination can increase risk; and that legal drugs can be as addictive as some illegal drugs” (DfES 2004). The guidance goes on to suggest that there may be occasions when you may need to focus on particular drugs. Practitioners should include poppers as part of their overall drug education provision but in some cases may feel it is important to focus on poppers, especially if an incident involving poppers has taken place or if there is particular interest from young people.

It is important to highlight the risks of using poppers in combination with other drugs, including alcohol and medication, especially medication to reduce blood pressure, as it can drop pressure to dangerously low levels. It is also important to highlight the dangers of using poppers in combination with other stimulant drugs, such as ecstasy, as this can put a considerable strain on the heart.

As poppers are associated with sexual activity, it can be useful to include poppers education as part of sexual health education. For more information, practitioners can refer to *Sex, alcohol and other drugs: Exploring the links in young people’s lives* (Lynch and Blake 2004).

For some young people, who may have experimented with poppers or are using poppers, a harm minimisation approach may be more appropriate. This approach aims to ensure young people know where the dangers lie, and how they can be reduced or avoided. This approach should not suggest that poppers use/misuse is condoned, but should allow young people to make choices; understand why others do use; and highlight associated risks.

References

Department for Education and Skills (2004) *Drugs: Guidance for schools*, London

DrugScope (2004) *DrugLink Guide to Drugs*, London

DrugScope, *DrugSearch – poppers*,

http://www.drugscope.org.uk/druginfo/drugsearch/ds_results.asp?file=\wip\11\11\1\poppers.html

FRANK, *A-Z of drugs, poppers*,

<http://www.talktofrank.com/azofdrugs/P/Poppers.aspx>

Lynch, J. & Blake, S. (2004) *Sex, alcohol and other drugs, Exploring the links in young people’s lives*, National Children’s Bureau, London

Useful organisations and websites

Adfam

Adfam offers information to families of drug and alcohol users, and the website has a database of local family support services.

Tel: 020 7928 8898

Email: admin@adfam.org.uk

Website: www.adfam.org.uk

Connexions Direct

Connexions Direct can help young people with information and advice on issues relating to health, housing, relationships with family and friends, career and learning options, money, as well as helping young people find out about activities they can get involved in. Connexions Direct advisers can be contacted phone, email, text or webchat.

Tel: 080 800 13219

Website: www.connexions-direct.com

Drug Education and Prevention Information Service (DEPIS)

Online information about drug education and prevention projects and resources for those working with young people and their parents and carers.

Website: <http://www.info.doh.gov.uk/doh/depisusers.nsf/Main?readForm>

Drug Education Forum (DEF)

A forum of national organisations in England which provide drug education to children and young people or offer a service to those who do.

Website: www.drugeducation.org.uk

DrugScope

DrugScope is a centre of expertise on illegal drugs, aiming to inform policy development and reduce drug-related risk. The website includes detailed drug information and access to the Information and Library Service. DrugScope also hosts the Drug Education Practitioners' Forum.

Email: info@drugscope.org.uk

Website: www.drugscope.org.uk

FRANK

FRANK is the National drugs awareness campaign aiming to raise awareness amongst young people of the risks of illegal drugs, and to provide details of sources of information and advice. It also provides support to parents/carers, helping to give them the skills and confidence to communicate with their children about drugs.

24 hour helpline: 0800 77 66 00

Email: frank@talktofrank.com

Website: www.talktofrank.com

Practitioners can receive free FRANK resource materials, updates and newsletters by registering at www.drugs.gov.uk/campaign

Health Development Agency

Health Information websites for young people
Mind, Body and Soul – for young people aged 14-16

www.mindbodysoul.gov.uk

Lifebytes – for young people aged 11-14

www.lifebytes.gov.uk

TeacherNet

TeacherNet is the Government site for teachers. Use this site to access resources, training, professional development and support.

Website: www.teachernet.gov.uk/pshe

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