Sniffing lighter fluid for a high (huffing)?

Dear Alice,

What are the effects of sniffing lighter fluid? I recently had a friend sit in a car to listen to music and smell lighter fluid. He tells me he gets a high from this. What are the effects of doing this? I would appreciate this to educate my friend.

Answer
Dear Reader,

Lighter fluid, like gasoline, model airplane glue, paint thinner, varnish, nail polish remover, and even some types of cover-up products, are all known in chemistry as "organic solvents," or part of the volatile organic compound (VOC) family. Like the effects of low-dose anesthesia, the pungent fumes of these chemicals produce a lightheaded and hot feeling. Many heavy solvent sniffers report altered states of consciousness, complete with visual hallucinations and vivid dreamlike experiences while awake. These are often the desired effects the user is trying to achieve. But because these substances contain toxins, they may also cause dizziness and nausea.

For many young people, inhalation of solvent fumes, also called "huffing," is their first chemically-induced high. This is likely due to the fact that these agents are legal, cheap, and readily available around the house. Although huffing may be seen as a cheap thrill (literally), the user may pay for it by vomiting, loss of sensation, and unconsciousness as unwanted side effects, or even death. Since 1970 there has been a steady rise in "sudden sniffing death," where a single session of huffing causes an otherwise healthy person to die. The user first experiences irregular and rapid heart beats, followed by heart failure and then death. Besides sudden sniffing death, huffing can also lead to death via asphyxiation, where the inhaled fumes take up the space in lungs, leaving no room for oxygen, suffocation from breathing in an enclosed area, convulsions, comas or seizures due to abnormal activity in the brain, and choking from inhaling vomit. If that's still not enough to worry about, the user can also die or be seriously injured if they drive, cross busy streets, and do other things that require sharp judgment and reflexes while under the influence.

Hopefully when your friend is informed of the many long-term downsides for such a short-lasting high, he will be more convinced to quit huffing and seek out other safe and natural highs that will let him breathe easily. For more information on the effects of huffing, check out the related Q&A's from the Go Ask Alice! archives below.

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