Dear Alice,

We have a helium tank in the basement for use with helium balloons. As you probably know, if you put the helium in your mouth, it changes the pitch of your voice to a high-pitched squeal. My son and his friend have discovered this and take great delight in engaging in this for amusement. My gut tells me this is not a good thing. But I'd like some back up. Is this dangerous? If so, how much? Please let me know.

Thank you,
Delighted to have such an informed source to go to...

Answer

Dear Delighted to have such an informed source to go to..., 

Many adults have childhood memories of breathing in helium (a colorless, odorless gas) from inflated balloons in science class or at a birthday party and hearing their own unrecognizable high-pitched voice (kind of like Alvin and the Chipmunks or The Wizard of Oz Munchkins). Helium is not only used to fill up balloons, but is also used in medicines and medical equipment. And as you noted, it will give you a high-pitched voice for a short period of time if inhaled. While the squeaky voice can be a crowd-pleasing party trick, huffing helium isn’t always all fun and games. Put simply, when someone inhales helium, it “displaces” oxygen. This means that the body is only getting helium rather than the oxygen it needs to keep everything in working order. Usually, a single breath of helium as a funny trick may just result in a bit of dizziness. But, as with other inhalants, there is a risk of passing out amongst other potential (and possibly serious) health issues. Getting some additional information may help you think about your son’s safety.

What are some of the risks of helium use? Some adolescents use helium as a recreational drug, and this has clued researchers into some of the more serious effects of frequent helium use. Researchers have found that many adolescents (just like many adults!) think of helium as just a harmless gas. Because it’s not seen as a serious drug, users may not consider it a risk to their health. Adolescents using helium report that that it makes them feel a sort of intoxication; however, it’s unclear whether the users get an actual “high” from inhaling it, or if it’s just the feeling of lightheadedness from lack of oxygen. Additionally, breathing 100 percent pure helium could
result in loss of consciousness, not just dizziness. Excessive or prolonged helium use has actually led to an increasing number of deaths from anoxia (a term that refers to a severely oxygen-starved brain and body).

Another possible risk to consider is the way helium is ingested. Is your son inhaling directly out of the tank? Doing so increases the possibility of rupturing a lung or creating an air embolism (gas bubbles in the blood that can cause seizures). As such, it is recommended not to inhale directly from the tank. What about inhaling from a balloon? While inhaling from a balloon might spare a person's lungs from intense pressure, younger children may accidentally inhale pieces of the balloon itself. And, no matter how it's inhaled, anyone is at risk of inhaling too much helium at once and passing out (At the very least, it may be best to do this while sitting down. That way, if dizziness or passing out occurs, it's less likely to result in falling down).

Now that you know a bit more about potential risks, it might be time to trust your gut and have a heart to heart with your son. And along those lines, it might also be best to keep the canister out of reach somewhere, to limit the opportunities that he and his friends have to use the helium and channel their inner chipmunk.

Alice!
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