



NITROUS OXIDE 'LAUGHING GAS'

WHAT IS NITROUS OXIDE?

It is a gas that when inhaled causes quick 'rush' and short lasting effects. When used in extra risky ways, used in large doses or used frequently over time it can cause harms to health.

Nitrous oxide has a number of industrial uses and is used medically. When mixed with air (50/50 gas and air) it is used as an anaesthetic gas for pain-relief in dentistry and child birth.

It is a colourless gas that some say is slightly sweet smelling and tasting. It can be found in different forms such as in whipped cream chargers 'whippets' which are small silver cartridges. It can also come as crackers with balloons attached or in large canisters which are different colours that are used to fill balloons.

Nitrous oxide is often categorised as a 'depressant', 'dissociative' or 'inhalant' type drug because of its effects and how it is consumed through inhalation. A depressant drug is one that slows the body down. A dissociative type drug has effects which causes disconnect or detachment from yourself or your surroundings.

Nitrous oxide is known by people who use it as 'Laughing Gas', 'Whippets', 'Chargers', 'N₂O', 'Nos' and 'Balloons'. Media reports have also termed this substance as 'Hippy Crack'.

It may be confused with CO₂ which comes in similar silver canisters used to inflate bike tyres. Because they are both gases used to fill balloons, nitrous oxide could also be confused with helium. The two gases are not related.

HOW IS IT TAKEN?

It is inhaled from a balloon which has been filled with the gas, sometimes referred to as 'nagging'. Gas needs to be discharged from the canister (large and small) to another object such as a balloon. To release the gas from 'whippets' canisters, they need to be fitted into a whipped cream canister or an object known as a 'cracker'. Larger nitrous oxide containers are also used to release gas directly into a balloon.

WHY DO PEOPLE USE NITROUS OXIDE?

People may choose to use this substance for quick euphoric effects.

WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS?

There are always risks with drugs and it is safer not to use at all.

It is important to note that each person will react differently to a substance, including nitrous oxide. Effects can be based on a number of factors depending on; how much is taken (the dose could be often unknown), personal factors such as the person's mental health, if the person has consumed the substance before and if other drugs, alcohol or prescription medication are used at the same time. The setting it is used in can also influence a person's reaction.

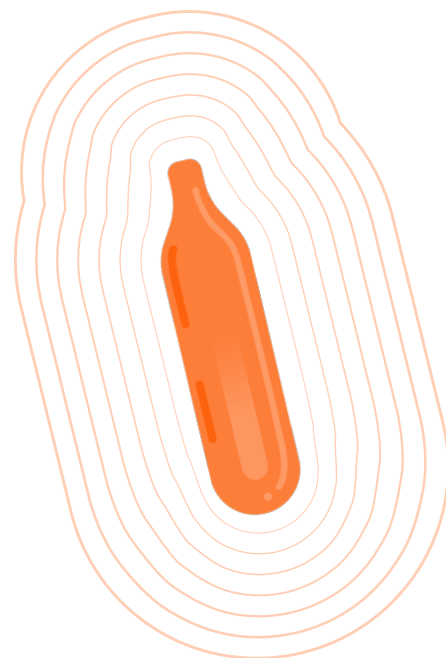
Effects start almost immediately peaking at about 10-30 seconds after use. The effects are short lived meaning they don't last long.

EFFECTS CAN INCLUDE:

- 'Dissociative effects' change in senses, perception and feelings. Feeling detached from yourself and your surroundings
- People can feel euphoric, giddy and want to giggle or laugh
- Some people feel relaxation, floating, calm and a sense of wellbeing
- Time distortion – losing track of time
- Effects on sound or visuals – visual patterning or hallucination

UNWANTED EFFECTS CAN INCLUDE:

- Some people may get a head ache, dizziness or blurred vision
- Loss of balance, feeling unsteady or disorientation
- Irritated respiratory tract - the part of the body that helps a person breathe
- Tight chest after heavy use
- People could feel nausea
- Short lived paranoia
- It can also cause a change in blood pressure for some people or sudden death due to a lack of oxygen



WHAT ARE THE RISKS?

Further research is needed in relation to the short and long term risks. We know that risks are increased based on the below factors:

1. How it is taken
2. How much is taken
3. How often it is taken

TAKING NITROUS OXIDE DIRECTLY FROM THE CANISTER WITHOUT A BALLOON CAN INCREASE HARMS

It is dangerous to inhale nitrous oxide directly from a canister. Inhaling directly from a canister can cause frost bite to the mouth and nose as well as cause damage the throat and lungs which can be risky. Gas within the canisters is extremely cold and needs to be warmed before inhaling.

SOME PEOPLE MAY BE AT GREATER RISK TO UNWANTED EFFECTS AND BECOMING UNWELL

People with heart, blood pressure or mental health concerns could be at greater risk. Nitrous oxide can cause a drop in oxygen levels which could increase heart rate.

THE SETTING

People risk falling or accidents after use, risks are increased if used in roadways or water.

THE ENVIRONMENT

Nitrous oxide related litter is a concern in some areas.

MIXING DRUGS INCREASES RISK

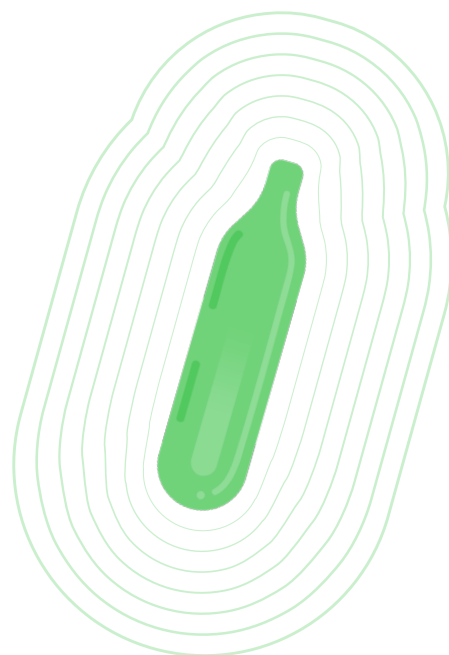
Using nitrous oxide with other drugs increases the risks, including use with alcohol or prescription medication. It is possible that nitrous oxide taken at the same time as stimulants has a greater effect on blood pressure and heart rate.

LONG TERM RISKS TO HEALTH

Long terms and heavy use can cause vitamin B12 deficiency which can lead to health harms. Vitamin B12 deficiency can cause nerve damage, pain/tingling in toes and fingers and changes to skin pigment. Look out for signs of vitamin B12 deficiency such as numbness in fingers, hands and toes and don't be afraid to discuss your concerns with a medical professional.

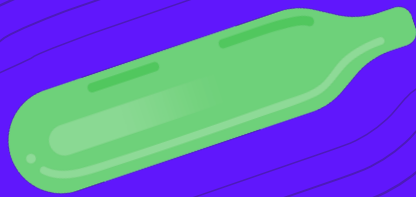
SUFFOCATION OR LACK OF AIR

Suffocation can happen when taking nitrous oxide. People risk being deprived of oxygen if too much nitrous oxide is inhaled or if a person uses continuously without taking breaths. Internationally there are some reports of people experiencing suffocation or lack of oxygen.



NITROUS OXIDE HARM REDUCTION

- **Don't inhale nitrous oxide directly from the canister or tank:** Always use a device to release the gas and use a balloon to inhale. Nitrous oxide within the canister is cold and could seriously damage the throat and lungs. Releasing the gas helps warm and normalise the pressure before using.
- **Don't use in extra risky ways:** Use in well ventilated locations and not confined spaces such as cars.
- **Don't use near roads or water:** You could become dizzy or lose coordination.
- **Sit down to minimise the risk of falling**
- **Start low and go slow:** Take your time, use very small amounts and make sure you are getting enough oxygen. Nitrous oxide is risky if it is inhaled continuously with no air taken.
- **Avoid using with other substances:** This includes using with alcohol and prescription medication. Nitrous oxide used with stimulant type drugs such as MDMA or cocaine could put extra pressure on your heart. Nitrous oxide can also make the effects of other drugs more intense and it is harder to predict and manage the effects.
- **Limit the amount of balloons consumed per session:** Don't use multiple balloons, one after the other. The more you take, the higher the risk.
- **Limit how frequently you use:** The long term risks associated with nitrous oxide are linked with regular use.
- **Don't share balloons with other people**
- **Don't be afraid to get medical help on 999/112 if someone becomes unwell**
- **Look out for long term harms:** Talk to your GP if you have numbness, pain, tingling or unusual sensations in your feet, arms, hands or legs as this could be a sign of vitamin B12 deficiency which can lead to irreversible long term health problems. Don't be afraid to tell medical professionals about your use of nitrous oxide.
- **Pick up litter after use**



FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT DRUGS GO TO WWW.DRUGS.IE

If you are concerned about your own or a loved one's substance use, contact the **HSE Helpline** on **1800 459 459** Monday – Friday 9:30 am – 5:30 pm or by email on **helpline@hse.ie**



DRUGS.ie
Drug and Alcohol Information and Support

