

NITROUS OXIDE: THE NOT SO FUNNY FACTS



What is nitrous oxide?

Nitrous oxide is a colourless gas that is regularly used in medical settings, mixed with oxygen, for sedation and pain relief and in commercial catering as a propellant for whipped cream. When used recreationally, nitrous oxide is usually inhaled from a balloon that has been inflated using a whipped cream charger, the silver canisters that are frequently seen littering streets and parks, which offer a visible indication of its increasing popularity. Most commonly known as 'laughing gas' because of the fits of laughter that it can induce, nitrous oxide is often seen as a harmless, soft drug, however, the reality isn't so funny. In fact, those who misuse nitrous oxide could be putting their health at considerable risk.

Why nitrous oxide misuse is no laughing matter

Nitrous oxide is a central nervous system depressant and when inhaled, it slows down the brain and body's responses, which can cause people to experience feelings of happiness, relaxation and euphoria, fits of giggles, and hallucinations and sound distortions. Alongside these more desirable effects, it can also cause light-headedness, dizziness, nausea, severe headaches and temporary but intense feelings of paranoia, and affect your coordination and stop you from thinking straight.

On average five people a year die
after inhaling nitrous oxide



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Hampton Knight are
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Nitrous oxide has been found to be the second most popular drug among 16 to 24-year-olds

One of the main concerns surrounding nitrous oxide misuse is that people tend to use it alongside other substances, and because the effects are relatively short-lived, there is a risk of people frequently re-dosing and taking more than they intended.

Mixing nitrous oxide with alcohol is particularly common and amplifies the risks associated with both substances, leading people to engage in more dangerous behaviour and increasing the likelihood of accidents. When used in high doses or inhaled directly from the canister or in an enclosed space, nitrous oxide can be extremely dangerous and can potentially result in oesophageal or facial burns and cause a lack of oxygen to the brain, which can lead to breathing difficulties, unconsciousness, and suffocation.

Regular or heavy use has been linked to circulatory problems, severe vitamin B12 deficiency (which can lead to anaemia and neurological damage), psychiatric issues, and even death, with an average of five people a year dying after inhaling the gas.

The law

Under the Psychoactive Substances Act 2016, it is illegal to supply nitrous oxide for recreational use. However, because it is used in the catering industry, it is still readily available and cheap to purchase, particularly online, and therefore easily accessible even to under-18s.

The 2018/2019 Crime Survey for England and Wales found that it is the second most popular drug behind cannabis among 16 to 24-year-olds in the UK and there have been reports of it being used by children as young as 11 years old.

Although the risks from nitrous oxide misuse are comparatively lower than those associated with other drugs, with it being so easy to get hold of, the worry for many parents will be that once children start using laughing gas to get high, they may later be tempted to move on to more dangerous or addictive substances. While some experts are calling for tighter regulation around the sale of nitrous oxide, particularly amid concerns about an apparent increase in its misuse during the coronavirus pandemic, it seems that the most important thing right now is to raise public awareness of the drug and its potentially lethal side effects.

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