

Nitrous Oxide Briefing

January 2023

The National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) and Office for Health Improvement and Disparities (OHID) would like to alert commissioners, police forces and public health, and – through them – their local partners, to increasing reports of harm from nitrous oxide misuse.

The ask for all local partners is to ensure that all front-line staff who come into contact with young people are aware of the risk of nitrous oxide misuse, particularly the emerging evidence of increased harm and the use of larger canisters, know where to access accurate information and have referral pathways in place for people who need help and support. They may also want to consider the misuse of nitrous oxide, and responses to it, in the "reducing demand" strand of their Combating Drug Partnership's local plan.

What is Nitrous Oxide?

Nitrous oxide is an odourless and colourless gas inhaled from balloons, or – far more dangerously – directly from canisters, for its psychoactive effects.

Nitrous Oxide is also called: Balloons, Chargers, Hippie Crack, Laughing Gas, Nos, Noz and Whippits

Symptoms can include feeling relaxed, giggly, sound distortions and/or dizzy, anxious and paranoid.



Risks of taking Nitrous Oxide

It is extremely dangerous to inhale Nitrous Oxide directly from canisters. Never place a plastic bag over your head. If too much is inhaled there is a high risk of falling unconscious and/or suffocating from the lack of oxygen.

In addition to the already widely-reported risks of accidents while under the influence and of direct harm from the cold gas, there are increasing hospital reports of young people with serious nerve damage that may be lasting. This is probably associated with the increasing availability of larger canisters of gas and people using more of it, perhaps without really keeping track of just how much more they are using. Nitrous oxide inactivates vitamin B12 leading to nerve damage.

It can also cause headaches and stop people from thinking straight.

If Nitrous Oxide is used on a regular basis it can lead to the body stopping the production of white blood cells properly.

The Law

As a psychoactive drug, nitrous oxide is controlled under the Psychoactive Substances Act, meaning its possession is not an offence but supply is.

Parents and guardians need to be aware of the dangers of the illegal use of nitrous oxide and, though legal to possess, people should not make the assumption that nitrous oxide is safe to use. This may be especially true when people drive and inhale the gas.

The use of nitrous oxide can cause significant impairment and users should be under no illusion that it is safe to drive following consumption. Effects on the nervous system, including drowsiness, dizziness and confusion, mean that significant impairment can be caused and offences under the Road Traffic Act are likely to be committed.

The NPCC actively encourage officers and forces to consider use of all legislation and the full range of their powers in responding to matters involving nitrous oxide. As well as criminal offences such as supply and road traffic offences, nitrous oxide will often be associated with ASB and an ASB intervention such as a PSPO can be an effective means to tackle the problem.

Further information and resources

There is information for young people and their families and carers on FRANK at www.talktofrank.com FRANK also lists sources of help and advice, including local services.

A recent report on nitrous oxide from the European Monitoring Centre on Drugs and Drug Addiction (EMCDDA) may be of interest even though we have left the EU as it includes a UK case study: Recreational use of nitrous oxide — a growing concern for Europe | www.emcdda.europa.eu

There is also detailed independent advice from the Greater Manchester Local Drug Information Service and DrugWatch forum in their briefing for professionals: N20-briefing-for-professionals-v1.0-DrugWatch-version.pdf <https://www.michaellinnell.org.uk/drugwatch.html>