What is nitrous oxide?

Nitrous oxide is a gas with several legitimate uses, but when inhaled it can make people feel euphoric and relaxed.

This happy feeling has led to it being nicknamed ‘laughing gas’. Some people also experience hallucinations.

However, there is a risk of death as a lack of oxygen can occur when using nitrous oxide. This risk is likely to be greater if the gas is consumed in an enclosed space or if a substantial amount is rapidly used.
Physical health effects and risks:

Nitrous oxide is depressant-type drug, which means it slows down your brain and your body’s responses.

The effects of nitrous oxide vary depending on how much has been inhaled, but they include:

- Feelings of euphoria, relaxation and calmness.
- Dizziness, difficulty in thinking straight and fits of giggles/laughter.
- Sound distortions or even hallucinations.
- In some people, a headache can be an unwanted immediate effect.
- Unconsciousness or death from lack of oxygen. This occurs when the available oxygen for breathing is effectively pushed out by the nitrous oxide. The risk is greater if the gas is consumed in an enclosed space or if a plastic bag is used that covers both nose and mouth.

- Heavy regular use of nitrous oxide can lead to deficiency of vitamin B12 and to a form of anaemia. The severe B12 deficiency can lead to serious nerve damage in some cases, which causes tingling and numbness in the fingers and toes and other extremities, and even difficulties with walking and pains in affected areas. Regular use may also depress formation of white blood cells.

It can be hard to judge the amount to use safely. If you have too much you can end up fainting, having an accident or much worse.

Mixing nitrous oxide with alcohol is especially dangerous as it can increase the risks associated with both substances and can lead to an increased risk of accidents or death.

Sulphur dioxide, a poisonous gas, is added to the nitrous oxide used in engines to discourage people from using it to get ‘high’.
**Harm minimisation:**

- Do not inhale the gas continuously without breathing air, as you will pass out and may die.
- Do not inhale the gas directly, always use a Balloon – The gas is so cold that it could damage your throat and lungs.
- Avoid mixing with other drugs, especially stimulants, as effects on blood pressure and heart rate could be unpredictable.

**The Law:**

Although nitrous oxide has been legal in the past, since the Psychoactive Substances Act came into effect on 26 May 2016, it is now illegal to supply or import nitrous oxide for human consumption.

Like drinking and driving, it’s illegal to drive if your driving has been impaired by taking drugs. With some drugs, you can even remain unfit to drive the next day.

As well as this drug-impaired-driving offence, it’s now illegal in England and Wales to drive over set levels for any of 17 named drugs (legal and illegal) in your body, whether or not you are impaired. Very low limits have been set for some common illegal drugs such as cannabis, cocaine and MDMA. You can get a heavy fine, be disqualified from driving or even go to prison.
Some Key Facts:

There are three main legitimate uses of nitrous oxide:

• To numb pain during medical procedures such as dental work.
• In engines to increase their power output.
• In catering, in whipped cream aerosol cans to prevent the cream going ‘bad’ and in food packaging to prevent the food from rotting.

It may be possible to become psychologically dependent on nitrous oxide, meaning that users develop an increased desire to keep using it despite any harms, but the evidence on this is limited.

In anecdotal reports, some people have reported developing cravings or feelings that they want to continue using nitrous oxide.

Find out more

ARCH – Addiction Recovery Community Hillingdon – is a free and confidential service available to young people and adults who live or are registered with a GP in Hillingdon.

If you have concerns about your use of nitrous oxide – or any other substance - you can refer yourself through our website on http://www.archhillingdon.org/make-an-appointment/, by calling us directly on 01895 207777, or by asking your GP or healthcare professional to refer you.

We offer a range of services from 8am until 8pm. Our main service hours are 9am -5pm.

We are open later on some evenings of the week.
Tell us, we’re listening!

Our staff want to know how they are doing. Tell us what you think at www.cnwl.nhs.uk/feedback and then we’ll know what we have to do.

If you are happy with the service you have received, please speak to a member of staff or contact our Patient Support Service on 0300 013 4799. They will ensure that your compliments are passed on to the service or individual concerned as quickly as possible.

If you are unhappy with our services, please speak to the service manager in the first instance. If this does not resolve your problem, please contact our Patient Support Service on 0300 013 4799 or at feedback.cnwl@nhs.net

Contact us
Old Bank House
64 High Street
Uxbridge UB8 1JP

Phone: 01895 207777
Email: arch.hillingdon@nhs.net

Other useful contacts

FRANK
0300 123 6600,
www.talktofrank.com

SORTED
01895 250497

Samaritans
116 123
www.samaritans.org

Mind
020 8519 2122
www.mind.org.uk

The Salvation Army
0208 5737342

Hillingdon Central Mosque
020 8589 9055

West London Somaliland Community
020 8848 1180

Hayes and Harlington Community Centre
020 8573 5273