

Information for parents concerned about Nitrous Oxide in their community



The HSE have developed practical advice for parents who are concerned about new drug trends among young people such as the use of nitrous oxide.

Young people and drug use

Adolescence is a period when young people come into contact with new ideas and behaviours. It is a time to “try out” adult roles and responsibilities. The desire to take on more independence may see young people seeking to explore what they or their peer group view as more ‘grown up’, interesting or new ideas which could include substance use. At the same time as these new issues are emerging, it is important to recognise that the young person’s brain is still growing from the ages of 12 until their mid-20s. Using alcohol or drugs during this time can damage the growing brain, causing long-term emotional problems and difficulties with learning, planning and memory.

Substance use (or other behaviours) of peers, as well as rejection by peers, can be important influences on the behaviour of young people, although the influence of parents still remains very significant – parents matter! Research shows that young people view their parents as credible sources of information and are influenced by parental beliefs and behaviours. By parents initiating drug awareness discussions, it means they can create an understanding that the topic of drugs and alcohol is open for discussion in an honest and compassionate space.

The most commonly used substances in Ireland are alcohol, cannabis, ecstasy and cocaine. New, different trends may emerge from time to time among different groups of people. These novel trends may be reported extensively in the media and generate a lot of attention. This year one such trend was in relation to nitrous oxide.

I’m concerned about nitrous oxide – what is it?

Nitrous oxide is a gas that’s commonly found in pressurised canisters. The gas is usually transferred from these canisters into balloons to inhale. People use nitrous oxide to feel a quick rush or ‘high’ which can make them feel intoxicated, giddy and want to laugh. It can also make people feel calm, relaxed or less anxious. Nitrous oxide has a number of medical and industrial uses and is used by dentists and during child birth. It is also used in food preparation in whipped cream canisters.



Parents may have seen the term 'Hippy Crack' featured in media reports from the UK and Ireland. This term is misleading and potentially frightening as nitrous oxide has nothing in common with drugs like 'crack cocaine'. Common names used to describe nitrous oxide are 'Laughing Gas', 'Balloons', 'Whippets', 'Chargers'.

What are the effects?

Effects can include:

- 'Dissociative effects', a change in senses, perception and feelings
- 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
- 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?

We're still learning about the short and long term risks of nitrous oxide.

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 due to loss of balance. Risks are increased if used near 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 using with alcohol or prescription medication.

Long term risks to health

Long term and heavy use is associated with causing vitamin B12 deficiency. Vitamin B12 deficiency can cause long term health issues, nerve damage, pain/tingling in toes and fingers and changes to skin pigment.

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 has been reports of people experiencing suffocation or lack of oxygen.

Quality of products

As with all products, the quality and purity could vary depending on the source. There is concern that people could confuse nitrous oxide with other gases or be sold poor quality products which could cause harm to health.

Nitrous oxide is an issue in my area, what should I discuss with my child?

- **Parents matter:** Parents play an important role in educating young people about drugs. Plan for a conversation with your child, research the facts, get a sense of our own feelings, on the issue, what approach you are taking and pick the right time to start the chat.
- **Start the discussion:** Try opening with a phrase like: “I saw something in the paper about young people. I wanted to discuss it with you to see if you know anything about it...” and take it from there.
- **Prepare active listening tips:** When a parent listens actively, this can encourage your child to talk and express their feelings. Get more advice on this approach from the HSE resource ‘Alcohol and Drugs: A Parent’s Guide’.
- **What should my child know?** The basic facts about substances, why they should avoid them - especially while their bodies and brains are still developing, ways to avoid harm, ways to enjoy themselves and cope with life’s ups and downs without using substances.
- **Raise your concerns about nitrous oxide but avoid focusing on one drug:** Ask your child what they think are the most common drugs that young people use in your community. It’s important that the discussion with your child includes all substances they may be aware of, or at risk of coming in contact with. Nitrous oxide may not be the only substance used in your area and other drugs like alcohol, cannabis, ecstasy or ketamine may also be known by young people. New trends can also emerge from time to time.
- **Why do people use substances?** When looking at the risks, it is also useful to show that you understand why young people use substances. The most commonly reported reason given by young people for initially trying a drug is curiosity. For example, people use cannabis to feel ‘chilled out’ or ‘relaxed’. With nitrous oxide, people use it to giggle, to feel laughter and for a quick rush of euphoria ‘high’.
- **Discuss the risks:** The risks range from short to long term harms and will depend on the substance. Some substances have more risks than others. It is important to highlight that each person will react to a substance differently, each friend in one group may have a different response – one could have a positive experience whereas another could have a negative reaction. Also, from one occasion of use to the next, the



same person may have different experiences. With nitrous oxide, the risks increase if it is used directly from a canister, if a lot is used; it is used frequently or with other substances. We are still learning about the risks associated with nitrous oxide use and young people. Risks can range from falling, accidents, difficulty breathing and suffocation as well as long term health harms.

- **Discuss the situation:** We need to be mindful of how children process the information they see around them. Ask have they seen the media interest, public discussions or people using in your community. Remind them that this doesn't necessarily mean it is a 'trend' among young people or that "everyone is doing it".
- **How do they feel about it?** Ask them how they feel about the recent media or local attention about nitrous oxide. Find out what do they know about it and ask if they have any questions? If you can't answer their question you could work together to find the answer – it's ok not to know everything!

Are you concerned about your child's regular use of nitrous oxide?

If your child is using nitrous oxide, or any drug, regularly you may wish to seek an appointment for your child and an adolescent drug and alcohol treatment service. These services now exist across Ireland and parents can generally make the referral themselves. You can also contact your local or regional Drug and Alcohol Task Force (DATF).

To find out where your local adolescent drug and alcohol treatment service or DATF is, check out [Drugs.ie/services](https://www.drugs.ie/services) or phone the **HSE Drug and Alcohol Helpline** at **1800 459 459** Monday – Friday 9:30 am – 5:30 pm or email helpline@hse.ie

For more information go to [Drugs.ie](https://www.drugs.ie) or download the **HSE** resource '[Alcohol and Drugs: A Parent's Guide](#)'



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