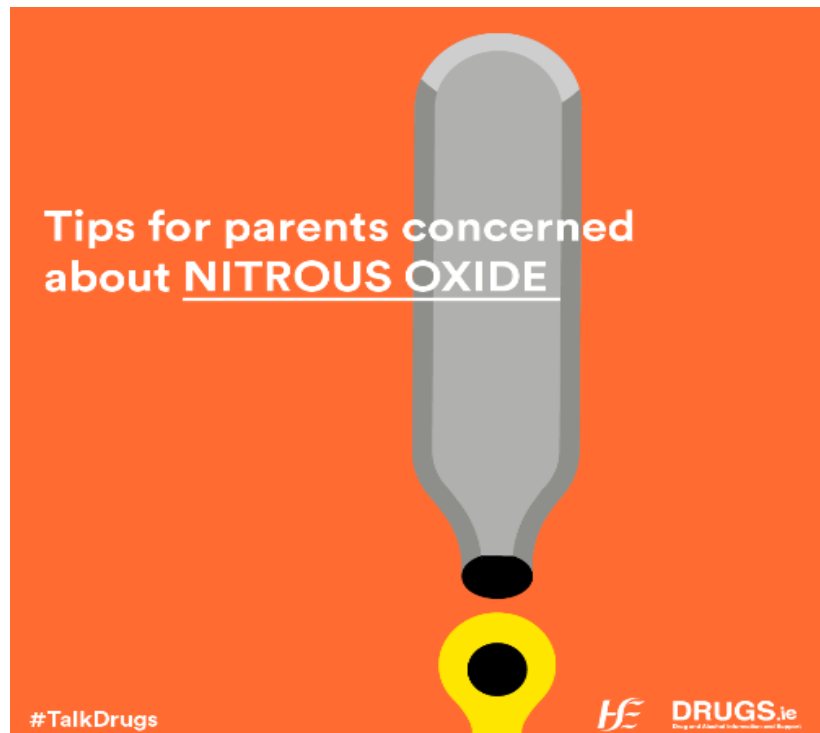


Practical advice to help you communicate with your child about drugs and new drug trends



The HSE have developed content 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.

Research shows that the earlier young people get involved with alcohol and drugs, the greater the risks both in the short and longer term. In light of these many risks, it is appropriate for parents to maintain an expectation that their children avoid alcohol until an appropriate age and avoid drug use. As with any rule or expectation, many children will at times fall short of the safety standards that we set.

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, although another trend could easily replace this in the coming months. Whatever the specific trend, the appropriate general principles in responding to drug use remain broadly similar.

I am 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 purposes such as use by dentists or administration during child birth. It is also used in food preparation, and much of the media attention has focused on the canisters used as part of whipped cream products.



Image 1. Whippet
Image BBC



Image 2. Cracker with balloon attached
Image Erowid



Image 3. Whipped cream dispenser
Image M.Linnell

Source: Drug watch UK

Parents may have seen the term 'hippie crack' used by some media in the UK and Ireland. This term is misleading, confusing and potentially frightening as nitrous oxide has nothing in common with drugs like 'crack cocaine'. However, we are not aware of young people using this term themselves. Common names are 'laughing gas', 'balloons', 'Whippets', 'chargers'.

We are still learning about the short and long term risks of nitrous oxide. Learn about the short and long term risks from Drugs.ie.

We know use is more dangerous if:

- Nitrous oxide is inhaled directly from a canister and not via a balloon. This can damage the throat and impact on breathing
- A number of canisters are used one after the other (large doses)
- Use is heavy and frequent – which can lead to long term harms
- It is used with other substances (Feedback from some areas indicate that young people may use nitrous oxide alongside alcohol in public places)
- If the person has an underlying condition particularly a respiratory or mental health condition
- Used beside roads or water due to the effects on coordination and balance
- Use while the brain is still growing could impact on development

What should I do to educate my child about drugs?

- **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, 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 in the HSE's Parents Guide the link for which is below.
- **What should my child know?** The basic facts about drugs and alcohol, 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.
- **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 a trend in your area but other drugs like alcohol, cannabis, ecstasy or ketamine could be. New trends emerge from time to time, if of concern, the HSE will issue information to the media where you can find more information on this trend on Drugs.ie.
- **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'.
- **What are 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 experiences whereas for the other it could be very negative. 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.

- **Communicating the risks:** It may be hard for a young person to really consider long term risks such as the effects on their developing brain. It can also be hard to understand the harms when they have not witnessed negative effects within their peer group. Pick points that could appeal to them and have an honest conversation about why you are concerned. You could choose to look at a website such as drugs.ie and read about the risks together, and discuss which ones you knew about before, and which ones are new information.
- **Prepare them for peer influence** - where they may see others engaging in behaviours and feel an interest themselves.

Get more information on discussing drugs with your child in the HSE resource 'Alcohol and Drugs: A Parent's Guide'

What else can I do to influence my child's decisions about drug and alcohol use?

- By modelling a healthy lifestyle yourself, this makes it more likely that children will make healthy decisions also.
- Look at your own drinking and drug use. If your own substance use is risky or excessive, whether that relates to alcohol or drugs, your children are more likely to use drugs and to drink early in life
- In general, it is good to have a small number of consistently enforced rules in the family home. This involves a degree of monitoring by parents, knowing where children are and who they are with.
- Do your best to actively support your children's involvement in organised sport, leisure, artistic activities in your community.

Get more information on rule setting and parenting in the HSE resource 'Alcohol and Drugs: A Parent's Guide'

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

- **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 on the substance. What do they know about it and do 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!
- **Highlight the risks: All drug use, including nitrous oxide, has long and short term risks.** The risks increase depending on how it is taken, how much and how often. We are still learning about the harms associated with nitrous oxide and young people.
- **Ask how young people take it:** Using in more risky ways increases the dangers (using from the canister, with a bag over their head, filling a room with the substance from large canisters).

- **Include other drugs:** Remember to try and include the discussion as part of a wider conversation about drug use as other drugs may be of concern locally and not just nitrous oxide
- **Tell them how you feel about this trend / let them know your care or concern.**
- Although nitrous oxide may be seen as a 'legal' drug, remind young people that the person supplying it is 'a dealer' may have criminal connections.
- The intoxicating effects of nitrous oxide are quite similar to those of alcohol. There are big differences though in the timing of effect when compared to alcohol.

I am very concerned about my 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.
- To find out where your local adolescent drug and alcohol treatment service is, check out drugs.ie or phone the HSE Drug and Alcohol Helpline at **1800 459 459**

For more information:

- See Drugs.ie parents section http://www.drugs.ie/drugs_info/for_parents_carers/
- Download the HSE resource 'Drugs and Alcohol: A Parent's Guide': bit.ly/2EcFYAo
- Contact your local Drug and Alcohol Task Force
- The HSE Drug and Alcohol Helpline is available Monday –Friday 9:30am – 5:30am on **1800 459 459**
- Contact The National Family Support Network