

Drug Sense UK

Tackling Drug Abuse in the Work Place, Schools, Colleges and the Home

Fact Sheet– Nitrous Oxide

Street names: Laughing Gas/Hippy Crack/N2O/Sweet Air

The information contained in this fact sheet on Nitrous Oxide is intended for use by staff in the preparation of educational student insets on this specific subject as well as aiding staff involved in the whole PSHE programme or any other form of Drugs Education. Staff involved in other key roles such as Safeguarding, school Nurses/Wardens/Security/Estates/Student Support etc, or have any other pastoral care responsibilities, in particular 'boarding schools', student accommodation officers may also find this information useful.



What is Nitrous Oxide..?

Nitrous Oxide is a controlled substance under the Medicines Act 1968 and has traditionally been associated with pain relief. Used in many medical professions in particular Dentists, and as pain relief during childbirth. It is also used in the food industry, typically as a 'propellant' in things like 'whipped cream canisters'. It has gained unprecedented popularity in the last few years as a 'party drug' particularly linked to

large festival events. A recent survey conducted by (TAB a Plymouth based newspaper) showed 45% of the 5573 respondents had experimented with this particular substance, other surveys suggest this is now the third most popular substance behind Cannabis and MDMA.

How is the substance used...??



The most popular method is to 'inhale' the substance from balloons. The balloons themselves are filled with the 'nitrous oxide' which is generally being sold in small canisters which can easily be purchased on line for a couple of pounds. The use of 'nitrous oxide' has become epidemic at many of the large music festivals and gigs being held around the country. Dealers are making vast amounts of money supplying the balloons with

very little control over the use and supply of this substance.

How dangerous is this substance??

Nitrous Oxide when inhaled is quickly absorbed into the bloodstream via the lungs. It is then transferred very quickly to the brain. The brain is literally starved of oxygen because the Nitrous Oxide in the blood stream depresses the lungs, which slows down the exchange of carbon dioxide for oxygen. The lack of oxygen in the lungs and blood stream can cause asphyxiation which can only be remedied if users get fresh air. It also cuts off oxygen supply to the brain, which can induce seizures and loss of consciousness. If a nitrous oxide abuser vomits during unconsciousness, the airway cannot be cleared, resulting in permanent brain damage or death.

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. As well as the danger of asphyxiation, **when the gas comes out of a canister it can be so cold it can burn**. A cold shock at the back of the throat can affect the vagus nerve, causing the heart rate to suddenly slow

That said death from use is very rare, those that have died through direct use of this substance tend to be persons who have put a bag over their head to inhale it or opened a tank in a sealed space and as such been subject to large doses without having access to fresh air. Those that are using this substance regular are using the 'balloon' method thus ensuring if they do inhale too much and pass out, the balloon they are holding literally is released.

What should my staff be looking out for in respect of paraphernalia linked with this substance misuse...?



Like many drugs that are used it is paramount you have staff trained to identify the paraphernalia that is associated with drugs, Nitrous Oxide is no different..!! The small silver canisters (far left) known as 'whippets' and the balloons (also pictured left) are both very common items of paraphernalia you can directly link to this misuse of this particular substance. It is more likely that you would discover these type of items in secluded area's such as woods, outbuildings or area's

which may have limited view from in-house CCTV, or after specific party type events held on campus.

Is there any specific physical signs and symptoms we could look out for...?

Persons directly under the influence of this substance may appear quite confused, look drunk, lack of co-ordination, be giggling and have difficulty in understanding what you are saying, or in some extreme case may have passed out.

What is the Law in respect of 'possession and supply' of Nitrous Oxide'....?

It is not illegal to possess 'Nitrous Oxide' however the 'Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency' has warned that **'the sale of Nitrous Oxide gas for inhalation'** is an offence under Section 52 of the Medicines Act 1968 which would also include **the supply (for monetary reward or not)** of a pharmacy medicine not under the control of a pharmacist. Anyone visiting any of the major festivals around the country will see for themselves how little or no control is being enforced in respect of this piece of legislation.

If it is not illegal to possess, how can we deter students from bringing this on site..?



The worrying trend is that young people see 'Nitrous Oxide' as safe and current in respect of 'trendy type drugs'. Unfortunately like many drugs the media plays its part in promoting the use of this substance (pictured left Michelle Keegan – Coronation soap star) along with many other social network sites which promote its use. **Your drugs policy** really is your backbone in respect to how you and your staff deter and deal with incidents on site involving this substance. It is therefore essential that you list 'Nitrous Oxide' as a 'specific' banned item, this would also include any such paraphernalia that could be linked to the use/supply of it. You may also wish to consider

including an educational 'inset' specifically on this topic.

For those managing students at College/Universities sites, particular attention should be paid to any in-house events such as parties/music events etc...in which you suspect this substance may be on the agenda. Because of the availability and very cheap purchase costs I believe this particular substance will continue to be very popular amongst the youngsters for the foreseeable future. It is therefore essential they get the correct information particularly with the dangers when inhaling Nitrous Oxide along with possible criminal offences linked to the supply of it. Many will be attracted to the limited enforcement of it and the profit margins that can be generated from the supply of it.