Recreational Nitrous Oxide Fact Sheet

Medical practitioners in Nevada County have seen an increase in patients seen at the emergency department and other clinical settings as a result of complications from recreational nitrous oxide use. These complications are often neurological, ranging from tingling in the extremities to long-term neurological damage. This fact sheet provides information about recreational nitrous oxide use.

WHAT IS NITROUS OXIDE?

Nitrous oxide (also known as laughing gas or whippets/whip-its) is a colorless gas that is commonly used for sedation and pain relief in medical settings, but is also used recreationally. In medical settings, nitrous oxide is highly regulated and typically administered along with oxygen for safety. When used recreationally, it is often ingested at much higher concentrations.

HOW IS NITROUS OXIDE USED?

Nitrous oxide most often comes in highly-pressurized metal canisters. People who are using nitrous oxide often inhale the gas through balloons. Inhaling nitrous oxide directly from the canister is dangerous because the gas is under high pressure and comes out extremely cold, which can damage the throat and lungs, stop breathing or slow the heart to a dangerous level.

CAN YOU OVERDOSE?

Inhaling nitrous oxide can be fatal in rare instances if you don't get enough oxygen (known as hypoxia) or a loss in blood pressure that results in a heart attack.

WHAT ARE THE SHORT-TERM EFFECTS OF NITROUS OXIDE?

The short-term effects of nitrous oxide use vary for each person. It often produces a sense of dissociation of the mind from the body (a sense of floating) and distorted perceptions. Nitrous oxide affects everyone differently, based on:

- Amount taken
- Person's size, weight and health
- Whether the person is used to taking it
- Whether other drugs are taken around the same time

The following effects may be felt almost immediately and can last for a few minutes:

- Euphoria
- Sedation
- Giddiness
- Sweating
- Blurred vision
- Confusion
- Numbness of the body
- Uncontrolled laughter
- Uncoordinated movements
- Dizziness and/or light-headedness
- Feeling unusually tired or weak

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Nitrous oxide cannisters

IS TREATMENT AVAILABLE?

While nitrous oxide is not physically addictive, psychological dependence does happen. Anyone interested in treatment for nitrous oxide or other drug use, can visit Know Overdose Nevada County's Local Resources page under Treatment to find treatment resource or contact Nevada County Behavioral Health at 530-265-1437.

Anyone experiencing the effects of prolonged nitrous oxide use, including nerve damage, should consult a medical practitioner as soon as possible, since research shows early treatment improves the chances of recovery. The primary treatment for the neurological impacts of prolonged nitrous oxide use is typically a regimen of Vitamin B12 injections, although the success of this treatment and recovery varies for each person.

Much of this fact sheet was adapted from the Alcohol & Drug Foundation's nitrous oxide webpage.

WHAT ARE THE LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF NITROUS OXIDE?

Long-term effect also vary from person-to-person and depend on the frequency, amount and length of use. Prolonged use of nitrous oxide may result in:

- Memory loss
- Vitamin B12 depletion (long-term depletion causes brain and nerve damage, including paralysis)
- Ringing or buzzing in the ears
- Incontinence (inability to control bladder and/or bowels)
- Numbness in the hands or feet
- Limb spasms
- Potential birth defects (if consumed during pregnancy)
- Weakened immune system
- Disruption to reproductive systems
- Depression
- Psychological dependence
- Psychosis

LEARN MORE

Web: KnowOverdoseNC.com/nitrous-oxide

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