

Nitrous Oxide or ‘Nanging’

Nitrous oxide (N₂O) is a colourless and tasteless gas that has a range of legitimate uses in the food industry, engineering and healthcare.

Due to its analgesic and anaesthetic properties, it is commonly used by health professionals to sedate patients undergoing minor medical procedures. It is also known as ‘laughing gas’ due to its euphoric and relaxant properties and was used recreationally at parties during the early 1800s before its industrial or medical potential was recognised.

‘Nanging’ refers to the inhalation of nitrous contained in small, pressurised cannisters (bulbs) used primarily for whipping cream.

As with any drug, the use of nitrous oxide is not risk-free. Some of the harms associated with nanging include:

- **injuries related to inhaling the gas**
- **accidents and falls**
- **asphyxiation**
- **nerve damage**

Deaths are rare but they can occur.

What is nitrous oxide and what is it used for?

Nitrous oxide was first synthesized in 1772 and is a colourless gas that is slightly sweet smelling and tasting. It has anaesthetic and pain-relieving properties and is commonly used by dentists and other medical professionals to sedate patients who are undergoing minor medical procedures. It is also offered to women in labour.

The automotive industry uses the gas to enhance engine performance and, when used for medical and industrial purposes, nitrous oxide is typically purchased in full-sized gas cylinders.

It can also act as a food additive and be used as a propellant to help whip cream. When used in this way, the gas usually comes in small chargers or bulbs which are single use, finger-sized steel cartridges that contain around 8g of highly pressurised nitrous oxide. These are often referred to as ‘nangs’.

What is ‘nanging’?

The act of inhaling nitrous oxide from whipped cream cartridges is known as ‘nanging’, with the chargers or bulbs containing the gas being called ‘nangs’. Most young people who use nitrous oxide purchase the gas in small pressurised canisters (chargers, bulbs, whippets or nangs) designed for use in the food industry, namely for whipping cream. The pressurised gas is typically released into a

balloon by puncturing the bulb. The user then inhales the gas from the balloon to get the desired effect.

Why is it called nanging?

Nitrous oxide use can cause sound to be distorted. Nanging is a slang term used to describe the repetitive sound distortions, sometimes likened to ringing in the ears, that some people hear when using nitrous oxide.

Why do people do it?

Nitrous oxide is legal, relatively cheap and readily available. People inhale it for the almost immediate euphoric and relaxant effects, beginning within seconds of inhaling the gas and lasting around two minutes. People who inhale nitrous report there is no hangover effect after the intoxication period has ended.

Is nanging safe?

Nanging is regarded by many as harmless and safe, however there have been a number of harms associated with nanging including:

- **injuries associated with inhaling:** the gas is intensely cold, meaning if the gas is inhaled directly from the bulb, the user is at risk of frostbite to the mouth, nose, lips and vocal cords. The anaesthetic effect can also contribute to harm, as they may not be able to feel the damage. Secondly, the

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gas leaves the bulb under high pressure and can cause injury to lung tissue if inhaled directly. This is why the gas is often dispelled into a balloon prior to inhalation

- **accidents and falls:** in high doses, nitrous oxide can cause a user to become less aware of pain and the environment around them. Lack of oxygen can lead to dizziness and disorientation and injury from tripping and falling
- **nerve damage:** heavy or prolonged use of nitrous oxide can lead to a depletion of vitamin B12 which can result in numbness in the fingers and toes. Left untreated this can progress to long-term nerve damage.
- **asphyxiation:** there have been deaths associated with nitrous oxide use, mostly due to asphyxiation, as the user is deprived of oxygen. This can be caused by exhaling and re-inhaling from balloons filled with nitrous oxide in an attempt to extend intoxication, by inhaling the gas by placing a bag over their head or by opening an industrial-sized gas cylinder containing nitrous in an enclosed space (i.e., in a car)

As with any drug, legal, illegal or pharmaceutical, the use of nitrous oxide is not risk-free. Whilst deaths involving nitrous oxide are rare, they can happen.

If it is used in medical procedures isn't it safe?

Just because nitrous oxide is used by medical professionals does not mean it is harmless or completely safe. When nitrous oxide is administered to a patient by a health professional, it is delivered in a controlled manner ensuring that an appropriate supply of oxygen is administered at the same time, therefore reducing the risk of asphyxiation. In addition, patients who are provided with nitrous oxide are always monitored to ensure safety and to minimise the risk of adverse outcomes.

Is nanging legal?

The laws around nitrous oxide and nanging vary from state to state. Across Australia, the sale of nitrous oxide canisters for the purpose of whipping cream is legal. Some states and territories, however, including NSW, Victoria, South Australia and the Northern Territory, have made it an offence to supply them to anyone who they believe intends to misuse them, i.e., to 'hang' and get high. In those parts of the country where such laws don't exist, many stores are clamping down on selling them to people under the age of 18 due to health concerns.

It is important to note that if police find young people who are using nitrous oxide in this way and they believe they are at risk, although there may not be an actual charge, they do have a 'duty of care' to ensure their safety and could remove the product and/or call their parents or even an ambulance if necessary.