



# NITROUS OXIDE

## What You Need To Know

### What is Nitrous Oxide?

Nitrous oxide, commonly known as laughing gas, is a colorless, non-flammable gas with a sweet odor. Nitrous oxide is used by dentists and doctors as a sedative during minor surgical procedures. In industrial and food preparation settings, nitrous oxide can be used as a propellant for aerosol cans, such as whipped cream dispensers.<sup>i</sup> Nitrous oxide has also been used recreationally for its sedating effects. Street names for nitrous oxide include nitro, N2O, NOS, nangs, whippet, hippy crack, buzz bomb, balloons.<sup>ii</sup>

### Is using nitrous oxide legal in California?

Nitrous oxide is legal when used for approved medical, industrial, or cooking purposes. Nitrous oxide is illegal when the intent is recreational intoxication. Based on the California Penal Code (PC) section 381b, nitrous oxide is a crime if an individual possesses it (or any substance containing nitrous oxide) for the purpose of intoxication or is knowingly under the influence of it (or any substance containing it).<sup>iii</sup>

### How is nitrous oxide being used?

Nitrous oxide or other anesthetic gases intended for medical use are contained in a gas tank and one method for nitrous oxide is to inhale it directly from a tank using medical tubing with a mask. Nitrous oxide is also found in whipped cream dispensers and charging canisters used to fill these dispensers. Because nitrous oxide is pressurized, when it is depressurized directly from a canister it can become very cold, so is often discharged into, and subsequently inhaled, from a balloon.<sup>iv</sup>

### Effects of nitrous oxide?

Nitrous oxide produces a brief feeling of euphoria, and is also associated with dizziness, dissociation, disorientation (both spatial and time-based), blurred vision, loss of balance, weakness in the legs, impotence, numbness in fingers, clumsiness of hands, nausea, chest tightness after heavy use, headache, vomiting, impaired memory, impaired cognition and motor performance, and learning problems. Recurrent use can lead to nerve problems and the loss of bone marrow function (resulting in a medical condition called megaloblastic anemia).<sup>v</sup>

### Where is nitrous oxide being sold?

Nitrous oxide cannisters can be found in restaurant supply stores for use in cooking, but can also be found on the shelves of your neighborhood smoke shop.

### Overdose by suffocation

Suffocation can happen when people use nitrous oxide with a bag over the head, opening a tank with nitrous in an enclosed space such as a car, or using a tank with a mask while unmonitored. These can result in losing while also blocking airway access to oxygen.

### Where can I find help, treatment, and support?

More information about how to access substance use services in LA County is accessible through the mobile-friendly RecoverLA platform: [www.RecoverLA.org](http://www.RecoverLA.org)  
Substance Abuse Service Helpline: 1-844-804-7500  
Services and Bed Availability Tool: <http://SUDHelpLA.org>

### References:

- i. <http://adf.org.au/drug-facts/nitrous-oxide>
- ii. <https://yourroom.health.nsw.gov.au/a-z-of-drugs/Pages/nitrous-oxide.aspx>
- iii. <https://codes.findlaw.com/ca/penal-code/pen-sect-381b/>
- iv. <https://yourroom.health.nsw.gov.au/a-z-of-drugs/Pages/nitrous-oxide.aspx>
- v. van Amsterdam J, Nabben T, van den Brink W. Recreational nitrous oxide use: Prevalence and risks. Regul Toxicol Pharmacol. 2015 Dec;73(3):790-6. doi:10.1016/j.yrtph.2015.10.017. Epub 2015 Oct 22. PMID: 26496821. <http://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/26496821>

Updated: 20JAN2026