

Appendix D - Nitrous Oxide – Medical Implications

Use as a recreational drug

Recreational users typically inhale via a balloon inflated with the gas. There are health risks associated with the recreational use of nitrous oxide.

The Government-funded drugs advice service “FRANK” emphasises that inhaling nitrous oxide directly from the canister is “very dangerous because the gas is under such high pressure. It can cause a spasm of the throat muscle and stop a person breathing.”

FRANK also says that nitrous oxide can cause:

- severe headache
- dizziness
- stop people thinking straight
- short-lived but intense feelings of paranoia.

Royal College of Nursing Report 2020

Use of Nitrous Oxide can lead to a range of health problems such as burns, a dangerously increased heart rate, swelling on the brain, nerve damage and anaemia, as well as serious psychological problems, according to delegates at the Royal College of Nursing Annual Conference.

They will demand action to highlight the drug’s dangers during a debate on what they say is “a significant lack of understanding of the impact that nitrous oxide has upon the health and wellbeing of individuals using it”, especially too little awareness among users of its pitfalls.

“Despite the increasing use of nitrous oxide, particularly among younger people, far too few people know about the risks. It might give a short-term high but the long-term damage is no laughing matter,” said Catherine Gamble, the RCN’s professional lead for mental health nursing.

On average five people a year die after inhaling the gas, and it caused 25 fatalities between 2010 and 2016, Office of National Statistics figures show