



January 2021

## Nitrous Oxide Misuse

### The Problem

Recreational inhalation abuse of Nitrous Oxide (N<sub>2</sub>O) is prevalent in the UK. It can cause serious damage to the health and livelihood of the user. It is commonly sold in small metal canisters containing the gas, also known as an 8 g mini, which is then either transferred into a balloon for inhalation using a dispenser or a 'cracker', which are readily available.

**The Solution: The British Compressed Gases Association (BCGA) is calling on the Government to implement a straightforward ban on consumer sales of Nitrous Oxide in order to curb this ongoing blight on our society.**

### Background

Recreational inhalation abuses of Nitrous Oxide (also known as 'Laughing Gas' or 'Hippy Crack') goes back to Victorian times, with Laughing Gas party hosts often 'obtaining' the gas via a friendly dentist or physician.

The 'euphoric' effect its inhalation gives, belies the very serious harm it causes. The 'Laughing Gas' name trivializes harm and gives the impression that inhaling the gas is 'harmless good fun'. That impression goes with awareness that it is used as a medical gas, and there have been many damaging examples of 'celebrity endorsement' through film, TV and footballing stars allowing themselves to be pictured inhaling the gas, typically from black balloons.



Image: Litter  
8 g mini canisters

### Harm

12 % of substance-related recorded deaths mention nitrogen or nitrous oxide on the death certificate<sup>1</sup>. It is the second most commonly used substance among 16- to 24-year-olds in England after cannabis, with half a million having used it in 2019. Unfortunately, there are many damaging risks of using the substance, such as:

- immediate death through asphyxiation, or by heart arrests triggered by the 'Hypoxia'- a condition caused by a shortage of oxygen;
- by the many dangers which users are exposed to whilst in the drunken state caused – including staggering into traffic, falling off balconies, drowning in swimming pools;
- repeated abuse which can cause serious damage to the central nervous system, leading to permanent loss of feeling and motor control in limbs and even paralysis;
- users attempting to inhale the gas directly from cylinders or from 8 g mini canisters and ending up with severe injury and cold burns;
- it is a powerful greenhouse gas, polluting the atmosphere and damaging the environment;
- streets, parks, university campuses and even school grounds are littered with the used 8 g steel mini canisters, which are now the prevalent mode of supply – presenting a hazard to animals, pedestrians, cyclists and motorcyclists.



## Legitimate uses of Nitrous Oxide

There are legitimate and important uses of the gas, which would not be affected by a ban on retail sales, such as:

- uses as a medical gas in hospitals, clinics, dental practices and in midwifery – in all these areas the gas is properly controlled and supplied as a licensed medicine and administered under qualified medical supervision;
- Nitrous Oxide is used to froth and propel synthetic cream. Professional catering use would not be affected by a retail ban. Synthetic cream dispense jugs are sold in the UK, but we suggest that their use is minor. Consumers could easily buy pre-mixed 'squirty cream' in cans;
- the use of Nitrous Oxide to enhance the power of engines, often on specialist race cars and dragsters. This professional use would not be affected.

## The Psychoactive Substances Act 2016

BCGA was instrumental in working with Government to include Nitrous Oxide in the provisions of the **Psychoactive Substances Act**. This was introduced primarily to address the huge problem which was the open sale of then 'Legal Highs' such as Spice, Mamba, Purple Bombs, etc.

Prior to the PS Act, it was commonplace to see balloons of Nitrous Oxide on sale at festivals, in clubs and pubs and in city centres – the balloons filled on site either from large cylinders (often stolen), or using 8 g mini canisters, in conjunction with otherwise empty cream dispense jugs.

BCGA also helped the NHS write extensive guidance on medical gas cylinder security. Large Nitrous Oxide cylinders are still targeted to be stolen from hospitals and elsewhere, and typically reappear at illegal raves. The Police are aware of this and BCGA members often cooperate with intelligence and assist where possible.

The PS Act outlawed the knowing or reckless supply of Nitrous Oxide for inhalation and has also had good effect in curbing the above Nitrous Oxide trade. However, there remains a huge and growing problem in the supply of 8 g mini-canisters of Nitrous Oxide gas for inhalation.

## What is BCGA suggesting?

People are very inventive, so we have to anticipate that if there was a ban on 8 g mini canisters, or restricted a ban to certain end uses, it would be circumnavigated and difficult to enforce. BCGA would be delighted to work with the relevant enforcement authorities on how a ban could work in practice.

**We call upon Government to use its Consumer Protection powers to outright ban all direct consumer sales of Nitrous Oxide gas.**

## Contact Details

For further information, please contact the BCGA Office, at [admin@bcga.co.uk](mailto:admin@bcga.co.uk)

For any press-related issues, please contact Jane Shepherd, Shepherd PR, [jane@shepherdpr.com](mailto:jane@shepherdpr.com), 01538 308685

## Reference

BCGA **Leaflet 19**, *Abuse of nitrous oxide*

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1. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/deaths/articles/deathsrelatedtovolatilesubstancesandheliumingreatbritain/2001to2016registrations>