

# Laughing gas: not funny

Laughing gas, also known as ‘Noz’, has appeared regularly in the media in recent years, with images of well-known celebrities taking it, and shocking stories about the possible side effects.

Next year, the supply and importation of laughing gas, along with a long list of substances known as ‘legal highs’, will be outlawed, punishable by up to seven years in prison. We asked Jeremy Sare of Angelus Foundation, an organisation raising awareness of the dangers of ‘legal highs’, to tell us more about a substance that has become increasingly popular with young people in the UK

## What is laughing gas, or ‘Noz’?

Recently, a friend contacted me, having found a few balloons and canisters of laughing gas following his 16-year-old son’s party. It was understandable that he was confused and worried – he’d read newspaper reports where the drug was referred to as ‘hippy crack’.

This phrase is understandably shocking, implying that it is a much more dangerous drug than it actually is. It is a term that has been used by the media – and in our experience, is not one used by young people themselves.

Laughing gas is nitrous oxide, an old-fashioned but still effective anaesthetic used mostly during labour as the gas part of ‘gas and air’. The risk of addiction is negligible and overdose is extremely rare. It is inhaled after filling balloons from small metal canisters bought cheaply over the internet. It gives a very short term, but intense, high.

Laughing gas is categorised as a ‘legal high’ but is considerably less risky than others, such as synthetic cannabis and stimulant mixtures. Those products can have highly unpredictable effects because a safe dose can be hard to determine. You can read more about other legal highs [here](#).

## What does laughing gas do to your body?

People who have taken N<sub>2</sub>O are likely to experience feelings of euphoria for 30-90 seconds and become very giggly. They may also notice that their bodily co-ordination is affected, and can experience dizziness or sometimes a very short paralysis.

Taking several doses can prolong the dream-like effects. It is not a hallucinogen but there is often a distortion of audio and visual perceptions.

Young people may be more likely to try it after a few drinks and the dizzy feeling can increase the risk of people falling over and injuring themselves. This is the major risk of taking the drug.

Exposure to large amounts starves the body of oxygen and can cause brain damage. Daily use will lead to a level of dependence, while regular use can deprive the body of vitamin B12 and lead to nerve damage. These are rare and isolated cases.

In July 2015, it was reported that one boy died after taking laughing gas. A few days later, it was discovered that his family believed the death was due to an underlying heart condition, [and not the legal high](#) (link is external).

### **What does the law say?**

The law currently says it should not be sold to anyone under 18, but young people seem to be able to get hold of it quite easily. Last year, one in eight 16-25 year olds [tried it](#) (link is external).

Even after the [upcoming ban on all psychoactive substances](#), which will include laughing gas, possession of the drug will not be illegal. But the distribution and importation will be.

This means, anyone ordering it online from abroad, will be breaking the law.

### **How should parents respond?**

Although parents should not categorise this behaviour as high-risk drug taking, neither is it harmless and you may be concerned that your child has taken something intoxicating.

Although you may be worried, it's important to remember that they have not broken the law by possessing it – and this will continue after the importing and selling of it becomes illegal in April 2016. But remind them that if they order it over the internet from somewhere abroad, they will be breaking the law.

It's a good idea for parents to raise these issues with their children to ensure they understand the levels of risk, how best to stay safe - and how to look after their friends too.