

Ready for another funny fact about N<sub>2</sub>O and the nitrites? Try this one: Commercial sales total in the tens of millions of dollars each year—and that doesn't include the uncounted underground trade in nitrous oxide at concerts and raves.

That's a lot of gas—and a lot of dizziness, headaches, and other side effects.

And that's not even the *least* funny/incongruous/weird part of the whole nitrite/nitrous oxide sniffing scene.

Because some experts believe that nitrites produce only a physical reaction and that any psychoactive effect is, quite literally, all in the user's head—it's just the brain trying to bounce back to normal and get a figurative grip on things.

Then, if you add in the risks we've already discussed, you may just come to the same conclusion that millions of other people have—that nitrites and nitrous oxide don't exactly add up to *tons* of fun after all.

As conclusions go, you could do a lot worse. ■



# Nitrous Oxide and Nitrite Inhalants



Just Say N<sub>2</sub>O

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To some people, nitrite inhalants and nitrous oxide are a lot of laughs.

That's one reason the chemicals are popular among people looking for quick, cheap thrills.

And nitrous oxide (commonly known as "laughing gas") and the nitrites mostly seem to fit the bill: They *are* cheap and easy to get (sometimes legally) in clubs and boutiques and through mail-order magazine ads.

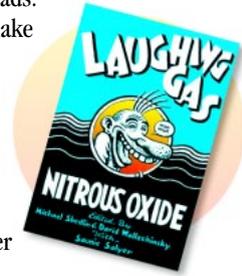
Still, that doesn't make them harmless.

According to the best available data, nitrous oxide and other inhalants figure into at least 100 deaths a year in the United States alone.

That's why we put together this pamphlet.

Because once you start digging, you realize that nitrites aren't harmless, and some of the problems they cause aren't that funny, either.

And as usual, the deeper you dig, the more dirt you discover.



*Name game. N<sub>2</sub>O is popular in part because its nickname, "laughing gas," makes it sound like good, clean fun.*

## ■ Amyl Nitrite and the High-Strung Heart

More than 130 years ago, a chemical was developed to treat *angina pectoris*, a painful heart condition.

Until then, physicians had often treated heart disease with *phlebotomy*, a scientific name for the unscientific technique of bleeding a patient with leeches to rid the body of disease-causing "impurities."

That's why angina sufferers were probably pretty pleased in 1867, when a British physician tried treating the condition with the new chemical, *amyl nitrite*.

It worked—in more ways than one.

Because in addition to dilating the blood vessels of the heart (which eases angina pain), amyl nitrite also triggers a short, dizzying burst of euphoria.

And it didn't take long for *that* fact to get noted by euphoria seekers, English and otherwise.



*Amyl Nitrite & N<sub>2</sub>O. If they look like party favors, you could be banging at the wrong parties.*

Amyl shuts off oxygen to the inner brain, triggering a sudden, intense weakness and dizziness.



## ■ Fast Forward: How Now

Although it's still not clearly understood how, exactly, amyl works, what happens when it does sure is.

Once inhaled, it triggers a quick jump in heart rate and drop in blood pressure and relaxes smooth muscle tissue. At the same time, it shuts off oxygen to the inner brain, producing a sudden, intense weakness and dizziness lasting 2-3 minutes. Sweating and flushing may also occur.

Still, if you need it, amyl nitrite is good medicine—or *was*, before it was replaced by newer drugs. In fact, the drug was so effective—and so relatively safe—that it was sold over the counter for years, packaged in small mesh-covered vials.

As time passed, though, amyl eventually found a larger market, one with *healthy* hearts—particularly once word spread that the drug seemed to intensify sexual orgasm. Users dubbed the vials "poppers" and "snappers," due to the sound they made when crushed, and snapped up what they could from pharmacies.

And even though amyl nitrite isn't an aphrodisiac and doesn't help treat sexual problems, it quickly gained a reputation as a "love drug," especially among gay men.

To counter exploding recreational use, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration reclassified amyl nitrite as a prescription-only drug in 1968.

## ■ Butyl and Beyond: Pursuing Hex-tasy

When amyl passed into prescription-only status, a small swarm of little-known chemical cousins crept out of the closet and into the noses and lungs of a new generation of users.

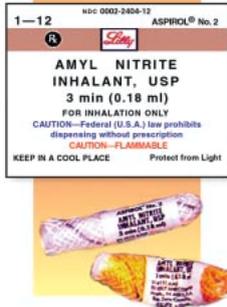
The most popular early stand-in was *butyl nitrite*, a chemical that differs only slightly from amyl, but packs plenty of the same punch.

Sold as a “room odorizer” or “liquid incense,” to sidestep the U.S. Food & Drug Administration’s regulatory authority, butyl was hawked under such trade names as “Locker Room” and “Jac-Aroma”—which successfully conveyed the awful smell of the chemical: a scent hovering somewhere between month-old mildew and sweaty workout gear.

That didn’t stop the curious, though, from trying them and may even have added to butyl’s *cachet* in the ’80s, as use quickly spread from gay bars to dance clubs to the general public.

Still, what happened to amyl eventually happened to butyl, too, as the U.S. Consumer Products Safety Commission stepped in where the FDA couldn’t to ban the chemical in 1988.

That only made the problem morph into something else. New act-alike chemicals appeared in almost-Biblical fashion (*Amyl begat Butyl which begat Isobutyl which begat Isoamyl which begat Isopropyl...*) as each in turn was removed from the market by federal agencies.



## ■ Cyclohexyl: Nitrites Now

The nitrites’ most recent incarnation is *cyclohexyl-nitrite*, now sold in head shops and adult book stores as a “head cleaner,” purportedly for VCR’s. Chemically, cyclohexyl is similar to its forerunners, amyl and butyl nitrite, with an industrial-strength odor that helps keep away the timid. Packaging is similar, too, right down to the warning label on the bottle:

**Caution: Flammable, harmful if swallowed, skin and eye irritant. If swallowed, drink two glasses milk or water, induce vomiting, call physician. For eye contact, flush with water. Avoid prolonged inhalation in confined areas. Keep out of reach of children.**

Ironically, the warning is printed on a plastic sleeve that peels away as soon as the bottle is opened.

Experts warn that such “cleaners” probably do more harm than good—both to VCR heads and to users. But as long as there’s a market for cheap thrills, there’ll be cheap people thrilled to meet market demand. ■

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Today, the newest nitrite is *cyclohexyl nitrite*, commonly sold as a “head cleaner” for VCR’s, in a new effort to bypass controls. (For details, see the box below.)

The chemicals remain popular due to their reputation as romance-enhancers and because they’re a cheap, readily-available alternative to other drugs.

Although butyl and the newer nitrites differ chemically, effects are roughly the same: a brief surge of dizziness and fluttering heart rate followed by sweating and flushing.

Nitrites are known for the speed and intensity of their effects: A nitrite rush is near-instantaneous, but fades almost as quickly, leading most users to inhale more—and often, more and more.

And that’s where the thrills can turn to chills, spills, and ills.

## ■ Pressure Problems

Short-term problems linked to use of nitrites are relatively minor, but *can* be painful nonetheless.

Probably the best-known adverse effect is a feeling of pressure behind the eyes and a multi-megawatt headache.

Other side effects include nausea, vomiting, faintness, and even blackout, particularly if the user is drinking or taking other drugs.

And given that many users sniff at crowded parties or in noisy bars or the middle of throbbing dance floors, nitrite blackouts carry special problems of their own.

But those are just short-term effects. Frequent or long-term use of nitrites can pose additional risks, including:

▶ **Glaucoma.** Nitrites increase pressure in the nerves and blood vessels in the eyes, which may contribute to this blinding eye disorder.

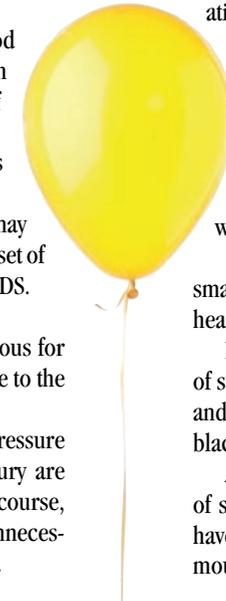


▶ **Blood Cell Damage.** Nitrites damage red blood cells and may cause an often-fatal anemia in which blood can no longer transport oxygen. This type of poisoning happens most often to users who swallow (rather than sniff) the chemical and requires immediate medical treatment.

▶ **HIV/AIDS.** Researchers believe that nitrites may impair immune response and contribute to the onset of secondary infections often seen in people with AIDS.

While excessive use of nitrites can be dangerous for anyone, some individuals are particularly sensitive to the chemicals’ stimulant action.

People suffering from anemia or high blood pressure or those who’ve experienced a recent head injury are particularly at risk. And pregnant women, of course, should avoid use of *all* inhalants (and all other unnecessary chemicals) to protect their unborn children.



## ■ N<sub>2</sub>O: ‘Giggle Gas’

Like amyl nitrite, nitrous oxide (N<sub>2</sub>O) is a medical drug with *tons* of history—this time dating back to the 18th Century.

Commonly known as “laughing gas,” nitrous is colorless and sweet-smelling, and produces giddiness, relaxation, floating sensations, and a mild anesthesia. Medically, it’s used for minor oral surgery and dental work. But that’s only its *day* job.

After hours, laughing gas moonlights as a recreational drug, particularly at concerts and clubs and alternative dance-culture events, or “raves.”

One source of N<sub>2</sub>O is whipped-cream containers, where it’s used as a propellant.

More commonly, though, the chemical is available in small canisters (known as “whip-its”), which are sold in head shops and through mail-order ads.

Bigger industrial-strength canisters find their way out of supply houses and dentists’ offices and into the hands and heads of users via burglaries and diversion onto the black market.

And despite its long history of use and its wide margin of safety in medical practice, dangers linked to nitrous have increased in recent years as unsupervised use has mounted. (See box below.)

## ▶ Nitro: Clearing the Air

One of the biggest casualties in the recent upsurge in use of nitrous oxide has been its long-held reputation for safety. Because as use has ballooned throughout the United States, so have reports of serious, even life-threatening risks linked to misuse.

▶ A main danger is the risk of suffocation. Users who sniff nitrous directly from a tank or a big enough balloon in a small enough space can pass out—permanently, if nobody intervenes.

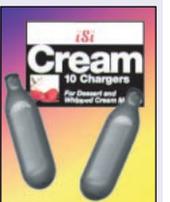
▶ Using nitrous oxide in a car can be particularly risky. A lot of users sniff nitrous in cars, often with the windows rolled tight, to keep the gas from escaping.

It works—too well. The result is even more suffocation deaths—along with a growing number of fatal car wrecks linked to the “toxic behavior” of nitrous users.

▶ There are other, less-lethal risks, too. Excessive use can cause nausea, vomiting, and disorientation, and since N<sub>2</sub>O impairs both motor control and coordination, it’s a good idea to avoid inhaling it while standing.

Want to avoid problems? Then avoid nitrous oxide—in fact, stay away from inhalants altogether.

They might *look* like a gas, but they can screw up your life Big Time—and fast. And forever. ■



Gas to Go. Whipped cream propellant canisters dispense straight shots of N<sub>2</sub>O.