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Sucking nitrous oxide – Safer from balloons or canisters? ^[1]

Dear Alice,

At raves and parties, I see people sucking on balloons. I hear it's laughing gas or nitrous oxide. So I was wondering if you suck it out of a balloon if it is safer than straight out of the cylinder? And will it get you high without harming you or killing brain cells?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Nitrous oxide, also known as laughing gas, is not a harmless recreational drug no matter how it is administered. However, inhaling the gas directly from the canister presents two hazards that the balloon method does not. Firstly, inability to control the speed at which the inhalant leaves the canister could result in trauma to the respiratory system if it rushes into the lungs too rapidly, or frostbite since pressurized gas can be extremely cold. Secondly, if the canister is used along with a mask (which permits for better control of the pressurization), users run the risk of passing out from lack of oxygen with the mask still attached to their face, leading to suffocation.

As suggested before, a laughing gas high isn't all about the giggles. In addition to potential injury to the respiratory tract, frostbite, and accidental asphyxiation, short term side-effects include drowsiness, nausea, and a lingering migraine-like headache. Long-term side-effects may include brain damage, resulting in lack of motor control and numbness. Contrary to popular belief, nitrous oxide does seem to have addictive properties and all inhalants have the potential to negatively impact brain cells because they displace oxygen.

For more information on the specific effects of nitrous or using inhalants you might want to check out the Related Q&As. Additionally, you may consider some questions about why someone would use nitrous in the first place. Is s/he trying to escape something? Just looking for some fun? Bored? Feeling pressured to participate? By thinking about the possible motivations, you may be able to determine some other activities that could meet your needs without the risks associated with using nitrous.

Alice!

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Published date:

Dec 24, 1999

Last reviewed on:

Jun 26, 2015

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