

**CPG Scottish Parliament
24th June 2026**

**When laughing gas is no longer
a laughing matter**

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Open to everyone

Show of hands if you know what these are and/or used for?



What is Nitrous Oxide?

- It is a gas which is inhaled – names such as ‘laughing gas,’ NSO, hippie crack
- Popular at festivals and parties
- Relatively cheap to buy
- Commonly purchased in small silver canisters known as “whippits.”



What is it legally used for?



Clinically for anaesthetic and pain relief



Culinary Grade used in the catering industry – e.g. whipped cream canisters

<https://creamchargers.co.uk/safety-information/>



How is it taken?

- Gas from cartridges is released into balloons using a ‘cracker’, ‘charger’ or other dispenser.
- The gas is then inhaled through the mouth from the balloon.
- It is a colourless, slightly sweet-smelling gas
- It has legal uses but as of 8th Nov 2023, nitrous oxide is illegal to possess, produce, buy and sell in the UK, as a Class C controlled drug.

<https://www.crew.scot/drug/nitrous-oxide/>

Re-Solv

The equivalent of
250 balloons or 3
Smart whip/ crème
deluxe



Re-Solv What do we know?

The true prevalence of drug use in a population can be difficult to ascertain due to: hidden nature of consumption: lack of taxation or sales data; variable availability in routine data collection.

In 2023, illicit drug use in the past 12 months was highest among people aged 25-34 years (27%) and 16-24 years (26%)

Estimates of prevalence can be derived from surveys, police seizure records or drug testing in prisons (77% of prisoners positive for drugs on admission).

Public Health Scotland - Consensus approach on prevention of substance use harm among children and young people Findings report - 2025

“We also need much better data in Scotland about drug prevalence: SALSUS to 2018 did not include enough information from young people outside of school settings, was self-selecting in terms of which schools and groups of young people took part and is now out of date.”

Professional stakeholder

[Appr on prevention](#)

Re-Solv Data and research

The panel expressed concerns about limitations of existing data, including:

- gaps in current data and evidence base
- lack of data about drug prevalence among children and young people
- applicability of existing evidence across population groups
- limitations of average population data and the need to sub-divide into demographics in future research

Risk factors substance use

- experience of trauma
- parental/familial/intergenerational problematic substance use
- peer influence
- parental drug-related death
- poor academic performance/academic pressure
- disengagement from school (including truanting)
- polysubstance use (using multiple substances at the same time)

Risks of Nitrous Oxide Use


- Risk of Vitamin B12 deficiency with heavy and regular use, leading to nerve damage, and potential for sudden death due to lack of oxygen.
- Doctors warn of “epidemic” of use by young people – *“Doctors have warned that they are seeing a rise in neurological complications among young people as a result of use of nitrous oxide, commonly known as laughing gas”.*

Dr David Nicholl, consultant neurologist and clinical lead at City Hospital in Birmingham

- Now sees more patients struggling with side effects of 'nos' than cocaine abuse. Laughing gas is the second most-used drug among 16-24-year-olds. He said that the volume of young people taking the substance has rocketed since the pandemic.



‘From highs to lows: a cautionary tale of nitrous oxide recreational use leading to sub-acute combined degeneration of the cord’

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Abstract

Background: Several causes lead to subacute combined degeneration (SACD) of the spinal cord, with nitrous oxide (N₂O) inhalation rapidly emerging as the leading cause of functional Vitamin B12 deficiency [1]. **Case Presentation:** A 28-year-old man presented with numbness in the extremities and an unstable gait despite having a normal serum Vitamin B12 level. He also disclosed the recreational abuse of N₂O. Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) of the cervical spine revealed abnormal signals consistent with SACD. The patient’s condition gradually improved after treatment with high dose Vitamin B12. Given the increasing number of N₂O-induced SACD cases, the potential for drug abuse requires vigilance from clinicians. **Conclusion:** Healthcare providers are urged to inquire about a patient’s history of N₂O inhalation to prevent the missed diagnosis of SACD.

Keywords: nitrous oxide; subacute combined degeneration (SACD); vitamin B12; causes; outcomes

Introduction

lower limbs. He had normal upper-limb motor strength (MRC 5/5) but exhibited reduced hand strength and power (4/5) on

Suspected nitrous oxide toxicity in Emergency Departments

Nitrous oxide should be specifically asked about as patients may not consider it a 'drug'.

The UK has historically seen some of the highest rates of N₂O use amongst people who use drugs.

8.7% of adults age 16-24 but the lag period in reporting national statistics means it is challenging to understand the current landscape.

Woman left paralysed after taking laughing gas 15 times a weekend



4.7k
SHARES

A young mum has issued a warning to people who inhale laughing gas after her use of the high left her paralysed.

Olivia Golding must now relearn how to walk and says she is heartbroken that she is unable to play with three-year-old son Parker.

Doctors told Miss Golding, 24, that her use of nitrous oxide caused Lichtheim's disease, a degeneration of the spinal cord.



Parker had to call for help as his mother was unable to move

'I cannot take myself to the toilet, feed myself or have a drink.'

Miss Golding, a car salesman, added that she got pins and needles in her neck and back while inhaling the gas about a month earlier.

Campaign Launch Date: **1 June 2026****Nicola Lee, Chair, British Burns Association**

New Prevention Campaign Warns of Severe Cold Burns Linked to Nitrous Oxide Misuse warning young people and the wider public about the growing number of serious cold burn injuries linked to the misuse of nitrous oxide canisters.

Recent national burn data has shown a significant increase of 81.5% in 2025 in severe injuries associated with nitrous oxide misuse, including frostbite and full-thickness burns requiring specialist medical treatment and surgery – inner thighs and groin



Damage to waste disposal centres

10 June 2026

More than £4.7m worth of damage has been caused to waste facilities from explosions linked to nitrous oxide canisters.

Explode when crushed or heated causing injuries to staff and damage to bin lorries.

Contractor Veolia reported more than 745 hours of plant outage due to explosions linked to nitrous oxide canisters in its facilities in 2025.

**Aug 2025 – 3 friends found with
91 million canisters of laughing gas -
£16.7 million made**

“This was an organised enterprise whose sole purpose was importing a psychoactive substance into the UK to be used illegally.

- **During a lengthy 12-week trial, the court heard that the quantity imported far exceeded the combined 3.8 million canisters used by two of the UK's largest coffee chains, Costa and Starbucks, over a similar timeframe.**

What can you do?

Prevention and education sessions – free - can you help us access people for awareness sessions, training or community events?

This could be for staff in a workplace, parents, local groups, any partnership working.....

Help us to gather data – access to any groups of young people (16-24) to build a better picture of prevalence and understanding of sources of supply via anonymous survey?