

In a glimpse

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Psychoactive uses of nitrous oxide: access, contexts of use and perceptions of risk

Since 2017, diverted use of nitrous oxide has been the subject of reports of use in public, significant media coverage, prevention campaigns and legislative and regulatory measures aiming to restrict access to nitrous oxide both at a French and European level. In August 2022, the French Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (OFDT) has published *Tendances* No. 151 on the reasons behind this phenomenon understood through user experiences.

In order to document the social contexts of use this qualitative survey is based on observations and individual interviews carried out with users approached by the OFDT's Emerging Trends and New Drugs (TREND) observation scheme and by Sociotopie, a research group bringing together sociologists and anthropologists as part of a project funded by the Hauts-de-France ARS (Regional Health Agency). How do these uses fit in with the social scene around parties and young people? What are young users' perceptions of the risks? How have ways of accessing the product changed?

Contexts of use at parties and a systematic association with other psychoactive substances

Respondents stated that they used nitrous oxide exclusively during social events and in groups. They were looking for an intense but brief sensation of "euphoria", floating or temporal distortion. Use practices often take codified and ritualised forms, for example when, on several occasions during a party, one balloon after another is filled with gas. They are then all used simultaneously, in order to optimise the effects, resulting in collective, synchronised euphoria, following the example of alcohol-based games.

Considered to be a "party drug" and "easy to use", nitrous oxide is however almost always perceived as a secondary product. If its effects are appreciated at certain times during a party, this is because they systematically complement, amplify or revive the effects of other psychoactive substances available during parties, in particular alcohol and, to a lesser extent, poppers, cannabis or psychostimulants.

François, a 24-year-old student, explains: "*My friends and I don't do it, as long as we're not messed up by alcohol (...) because it amplifies the effects of alcohol*".

Onset of use and continued use: the role of peers

The desire to experience new sensations is systematically mentioned as the main reason for experimenting with nitrous oxide. Peers play a central role: they describe the effects of the gas in a positive light to new users and insist on its supposedly harmless nature.

Maxime, 32 years old, says: *“My mates ask me about it and I say that it’s laughing gas cartridges. I tell them that it’s fun, like poppers, that it’s not dangerous”*.

This was how Ambre, 24 years old, was convinced to try it by some of her fellow medical students: *“My friends reassured me the first time. They said, ‘Don’t worry, it’s only gas, it goes into your lungs and then goes out, there’s no problem (...)”*.

More “experienced” peers also take on the role of passing on the techniques required to use nitrous oxide, particularly in order to limit certain risks (using it when seated so that the risk of falling caused by a potential loss of consciousness can be mitigated, limiting the number of cartridges used and spacing out doses during parties, etc.). As such, the respondents were aware of the risks immediately linked to use and adopted practices that aimed to mitigate them. Nevertheless, they showed little concern for the negative health consequences (such as neurological and neuromuscular disorders) documented in particular by the French Network of the Regional Abuse and Dependence Monitoring Centres (CEIP-A). This harm may occur during intensive and repeated use but these users consider this as very different from their practices.

Tendances no. 151 shows that the nitrous oxide use observed forms part of the social scene around parties and young people and takes place in situations of polydrug use. It also emphasises that the low price and high availability of gas contribute to the development of use, despite attempts by the public authorities to restrict access to minors. Nitrous oxide is still easily accessible, due in particular to the diversification of supply (grocery shops, nightclubs, bars, local shops, etc.) and the means of supply (social networks, internet, etc.).

Further readings (in French)

Tendances no. 151, [Les usages psychoactifs du protoxyde d’azote](#), 8 p.

Report. [Étude sociologique sur les usages et les usagers de protoxyde d’azote dans les Hauts-de-France](#), 97 p.

Internet. [L’usage détourné du protoxyde d’azote, une pratique à risques de plus en plus répandue](#)

Further reading

EMCDDA, [Recreational use of nitrous oxide: a growing concern for Europe](#), 82 p.