

PATIENT'S GUIDE TO USING NITROUS OXIDE: RISKS AND BENEFITS

WHAT IS NITROUS OXIDE?

Nitrous oxide is a gas. It is colorless, odorless, and tasteless. Nitrous oxide decreases pain sensations. It is a blend of 50% nitrous oxide and 50% oxygen. Operating rooms, dental offices and labor and delivery suites often use nitrous oxide to control pain.

HOW DOES IT WORK?

Patients inhale the gas through a mask. Patients hold their own mask. This lets you to decide how much gas to use. To get the most pain relief, you should start inhaling the gas 30-45 seconds BEFORE the next contraction starts. The gas then reaches its peak pain control effect when the contraction reaches its peak intensity. To prevent exposing your support person(s), visitors, and hospital staff from to the gas it is important to exhale directly into the mask.

HOW MUCH WILL NITROUS OXIDE RELIEVE MY PAIN?

How well nitrous oxide works depends on each person. For some women it just “takes the edge off” the peak of contraction pain but allows them to cope better with labor. Some patients report significant pain relief. Nitrous oxide does reduce anxiety. This effect also helps women better manage the pain. Some women do not care for how nitrous oxide makes them feel or they do not find it helpful enough. These women then try the other pain management options available.

WILL USING NITROUS OXIDE SLOW PROGRESSION OF MY LABOR?

No, nitrous oxide does not have any effect on your uterus or contractions and does not affect labor progression.

HOW WILL I FEEL USING NITROUS OXIDE? WHAT ARE THE SIDE EFFECTS OR RISKS TO ME?

You might feel drowsy, lightheaded, dizzy, or a little silly while you are using nitrous oxide. Some women have nausea after long use. Medications are available to relieve nausea, if needed. You may also feel dry mouth or tingling fingers. If you inhale too much gas, you might faint or pass out temporarily. This is why it is important that ONLY you hold the nitrous mask. When you receive enough gas to relax fully, your hand will naturally fall away from your face. You then stop inhaling the gas and this prevents you from fainting. Occasionally, some women feel restless or confused. Most side effects go away quickly once you stop inhaling the gas.

DOES NITROUS OXIDE AFFECT MY BABY? WHAT ARE THE RISKS TO MY BABY?

For many years, around the world, laboring women have used nitrous oxide to control pain during labor and childbirth. While nitrous oxide DOES cross the placenta to baby, baby clears the gas through their lungs very quickly, in about 3 minutes after birth. Currently, there is no scientific evidence that nitrous oxide adversely affects babies' APGAR scores, newborn blood gas levels or newborn behavior. While some animal research demonstrated fetal effects when using high doses of nitrous oxide, the dose used to control labor pain is much, much lower.

CAN I BE OUT OF BED OR IN THE TUB WHILE USING NITROUS OXIDE?

Yes. You may get out of bed but only with assistance from staff. Using nitrous oxide may increase your chance of falling if you walk without assistance.

CAN I STILL GET AN EPIDURAL IF I USE NITROUS OXIDE?

Yes. You may choose to use nitrous oxide before having an epidural placed, or before choosing another method of pain relief. However, we do not use nitrous at the same time as using an epidural or other medication.

ARE THERE ANY REASONS I COULD NOT USE NITROUS OXIDE?

Yes. You cannot use nitrous oxide if you have any of the following:

- You cannot hold your own facemask;
- You received a dose of narcotics within the past one hour;
- Have pernicious anemia (Vitamin B-12 deficiency) and require vitamin supplements;
- Have had gastric bypass or similar surgery; or
- Have another rare condition that your provider believes contradicts the use of nitrous.

WHAT ARE MY RESPONSIBILITIES?

You must be the only person holding the mask to your face to inhale the nitrous oxide. No one else can hold the mask to your face. This lets you use the nitrous oxide only when you need it for pain relief. If someone else holds the mask to your face, you could receive the gas when you are not in pain. This can cause over-sedation, airway blockage or decreased oxygen to you or your baby. You must exhale directly into the mask to reduce the risk of exposing visitors and staff to the gas. You must agree that the nitrous oxide is for your use only and understand we will remove the nitrous if we suspect anyone else is using it.