

# Up: The rise of nitrous oxide abuse. An international survey of contemporary nitrous oxide use

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## **Abstract**

In recent years the recreational use of inhaled nitrous oxide gas (N<sub>2</sub>O) is becoming increasingly popular, yet little is known about the characteristics of its users or the effects they experience. This paper presents original research from the 2014 Global Drug Survey (GDS) (n=74,864). GDS runs the largest survey of recreational drug use in the world. The findings confirm N<sub>2</sub>O as a very common drug of use, in particular in the UK and US (38.6% and 29.4% lifetime prevalence). In the UK N<sub>2</sub>O was reported to be the eighth most commonly used substance. N<sub>2</sub>O was generally consumed via gas-filled balloons, at festivals and clubs where use of other substances was common. The vast majority of users use infrequently, and their use is not associated with significant harm. However, there appears to be a subpopulation of heavy users who may be using in a dependent pattern. Analysis of last year N<sub>2</sub>O users (n=4883), confirms that N<sub>2</sub>O is associated with hallucinations and confusion (which may be the desired effects) and persistent numbness and accidental injury (27.8%, 23.9%, 4.3% and 1.2% of last year users, respectively). Accidental injury is associated with the highest number of hits per session, suggesting a dose response relationship. The presence of significant harm is discussed in the light of public education on the risks of N<sub>2</sub>O use and harm-reduction strategies appropriate to N<sub>2</sub>O use. Further work needs to be completed to confirm the presence of persistent neurological symptoms in recreational users.

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