

Nitrous Oxide Deaths Surge Among U.S. Youths, Experts Warn

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Deaths linked to recreational use of nitrous oxide, commonly known as “laughing gas,” have increased dramatically across the United States, particularly among adolescents, according to new research. A study published on July 30 in *JAMA Network Open* reveals a 578% increase in nitrous oxide-related fatalities between 2010 and 2023, raising alarms among public health experts.

In 2023 alone, 156 Americans, many of them minors, died from inhaling the substance. Despite its legal status and widespread availability, the gas is increasingly being misused to get high. Andrew Yockey, assistant professor of public health at the University of Mississippi and co-author of the study, stated that the issue is not isolated to any one area. “It’s everywhere,” Yockey said in a press release, emphasizing the urgent need for national-level monitoring. “The numbers are still small right now, but they’re growing and they’re growing fast.”

Nitrous oxide is commonly sold in small metal canisters known as “whippets ” and is easily accessible both online and in gas stations. There are currently no federal age restrictions on purchasing the gas. Many of the products are marketed with flavored nozzles, such as cotton candy or bubble gum, which researchers argue are designed to attract younger users. Yockey questioned the intent behind these marketing tactics, saying, “These flavored nozzles bubblegum, mango, tell me these aren’t being marketed to kids?”

According to the study, eighth-grade students represent a significant share of nitrous oxide users. The gas, while often perceived as harmless, poses serious health risks. Documented side effects include frostbite, blood clots, hallucinations, heart palpitations, and in extreme cases, brain damage, paralysis, or death.

Co-author Rachel Hoopsick, assistant professor of health and kinesiology at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, expressed concern over the false sense of safety surrounding the substance. “It’s legal, easy to buy, and often viewed as harmless,” she said. “But frequent or high-volume use can lead to serious neurological damage, psychiatric symptoms, or even death.”

The research team analyzed data from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) over 14 years. While only 23 nitrous oxide-related deaths were reported in 2010, the numbers have climbed significantly in the years since. Researchers attribute the trend in part to increased product availability after 2020 and policy changes overseas, such as the United Kingdom’s 2023 ban on nitrous oxide.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) issued a public warning earlier this year listing 15 products sold under names like “Baking Bad,” “Cloud Nine,” and “Whip-It!” However, researchers believe dozens more exist and are slipping through regulatory gaps.

Hoopsick noted that both she and Yockey began their investigation after observing nitrous oxide use on their university campuses. “These weren’t just isolated incidents; they pointed to a larger, overlooked public health issue,” she said. Both researchers agree that more outreach is needed, especially to families. “Public awareness is far behind where it needs to be,” Hoopsick said. “Legal doesn’t mean safe.”

She urged parents, educators, and healthcare providers to initiate open conversations with young people about the risks. “Early, nonjudgmental conversations can make a real difference,” she added.