

Your Health Education

Nitrous Oxide for Pain Relief During Labor

Frequently Asked Questions

What is nitrous oxide and how is it used in labor?

Nitrous oxide is used to lessen pain during labor. It is known by most people as “laughing gas.” For labor pain, nitrous oxide gas is mixed with oxygen and breathed through a mask or mouthpiece.

Nitrous oxide is one of the most common labor pain relief methods used in other countries and has been safely used for years. Nitrous oxide has not been used as often in the United States for labor, but more hospitals are beginning to offer it. Many dentists use it to help with pain during dental procedures.

How does nitrous oxide work to relieve pain during labor?

The nitrous oxide is mixed in special equipment, and you breathe it through a mask or mouthpiece. You hold your own mask, so you decide when to use it and how much you need. You start to breathe in the gas mixture about 30 seconds before a contraction begins and then you breathe back into the mask. Starting to breathe the gas before a contraction begins helps the gas to work best about the same time as the contraction peaks, so you get the greatest amount of relief. You put the mask down between contractions and use it when you choose.

How much does nitrous oxide help with labor pain?

Nitrous oxide works differently for each woman. Here are some experiences of previous patients:

- Many women say that their pain is not completely relieved, but the pain did not bother them as much.
- Many say it is helpful and they would choose to use it again.

- Some women say that it “takes the edge off” the peak of the contractions helping them cope with their labor better.
- Some women say it lowers their anxiety so they feel less tense during contractions, which helps cope with pain better.
- Other women did not find that nitrous oxide was helpful enough or did not like the way it made them feel.

How will I feel while using nitrous oxide?

You may feel drowsy, lightheaded, or a little silly while using nitrous oxide. Because you may feel a little unsteady, a family member or staff member should always be in the room while you are breathing the gas. There are common side effects that should go away quickly when you stop breathing the gas. Some women feel nauseated, and may even throw up. Other medications can be given to try to make the nausea go away.

What if nitrous oxide doesn't work? Can I choose something else like an epidural?

Yes, other pain relief methods can still be used after using nitrous oxide. Some women may use nitrous oxide before they have an epidural placed. Usually they are not used at the same time. You may choose to use nitrous oxide first and then move to a different type of pain relief in labor.

Does nitrous oxide have any bad side effects?

You can pass out for a minute if you take in too much gas, but this is not likely to occur if you use it as directed. For your safety, you should be the only one controlling the amount of gas you receive. When you are the only one holding the mask, your hands will slip from the mask and you will no longer breathe in the mask if you start to get sleepy. This protects you from passing out.

Does nitrous oxide affect my baby?

Nitrous oxide is removed quickly by the baby's lungs when the baby begins to breathe and should not have harmful effects on the baby's breathing. It has no known effects on breastfeeding. Although there are no known harmful effects after being used for over 75 years in other countries, there has not been much official research done.

Does nitrous oxide affect labor progress?

Nitrous oxide does not have any known effects on your uterus, contractions, or labor progress.

Can I be out of bed and use nitrous oxide?

You may sit in a rocker, chair, or the side of your bed with assistance. You will need to be near the nitrous oxide machine to use it. Because it can make you dizzy, you will not be able to stand or walk around while using the nitrous oxide.

Are there any reasons I could not use nitrous oxide?

You cannot use nitrous oxide if you:

- cannot hold your own mask by yourself.
- have a vitamin B12 deficiency called pernicious anemia.
- have certain medical conditions that your healthcare provider will ask you about when taking your medical history.

Safety Measures: If anyone else is observed or suspected of using the nitrous oxide mask, the nitrous oxide machine will be removed from the room and the Security Department may be notified.

Please ask your doctor, midwife, or nurse if you have any questions or concerns.