

Using Nitrous Oxide During Labor: What You Need To Know

What is Nitrous Oxide?

Nitrous oxide is a blend of nitrous oxide and oxygen. It has a calming effect that can help you cope with pain during labor.

Women have been using nitrous oxide safely during labor for many years in Europe, Canada and Australia. Its use is increasing in the United States.

How Do You Use Nitrous Oxide?

You breathe in nitrous oxide through a mask. You will hold the mask to your face and breathe in and out normally.

It is best to start using it about 30 seconds before a contraction starts so the effects of the nitrous oxide can begin working at about the same time the contraction is strongest. This will help you get the most relief.

How Well Does Nitrous Oxide Work?

It works different for each woman. About half of the women who have used nitrous oxide said they would use it again. It can help take away some of the pain and anxiety during a contraction to help you cope better during labor. You can use other pain relief options after you stop using nitrous oxide.

How Will You Feel When Using Nitrous Oxide?

You may feel relaxed, sleepy or lightheaded. Some women have said that they had some nausea when using nitrous oxide.

It is possible to feel dizzy and unsteady, so you will need to have someone with you if you are out of bed and using nitrous oxide. The side effects will go away when you stop using it.

You control how much nitrous oxide you get by holding the mask on your face. If you get very relaxed, your hand will slip away from the mask and you will no longer breathe in the gas. This protects you from passing out or getting too much.

For the safety of you and your baby:
Never prop the mask against your face or have anyone else hold the mask.

Is Nitrous Oxide Safe for You and Your Baby?

Yes. It is safe to use nitrous oxide during labor. It does not affect contractions or the progress of labor.

When you stop using nitrous oxide, the side effects of the gas are gone in about 1 minute. You and your baby will not need any extra monitoring while using nitrous oxide.

If you get too sleepy, a monitor to check your oxygen levels may be put on your finger. Your baby's heart rate will be checked just like it would if you were not using nitrous oxide.

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Can You Use Nitrous Oxide and Be Out of Bed?

As long as you are steady on your feet, you may stand at the bedside or sit on a birthing ball. You will need someone with you whenever you are out of bed. You cannot use nitrous oxide while in the tub or shower.

Can You Have Nitrous Oxide and Intravenous (IV) Medicine?

Yes, but you cannot have them at the same time. You can be given IV pain medicine 5 minutes after you have stopped using nitrous oxide.

If you are already using IV pain medicine, you must wait 2 hours from the last dose of medicine before you can use nitrous oxide.

Can You Have Nitrous Oxide and a Labor Epidural?

Yes, but you cannot have them at the same time. You may use nitrous oxide until an epidural is ready to be placed.

Do Other People in the Room Get Exposed to Nitrous Oxide?

When used correctly, the chance of anyone else in the room being exposed to nitrous oxide is very small.

You will be instructed how to breathe in and out through your mask, which will filter and remove the gas when you breathe out.

Is Using Nitrous Oxide Right For You?

Your health care provider will review your health history to see if there are any reasons why you cannot have nitrous oxide such as a vitamin B₁₂ deficiency, asthma, an upper respiratory infection or other medical conditions.

You also need to have a normal pregnancy and be more than 37 weeks pregnant.

If your health care provider says it's OK to use nitrous oxide and you would like to have it as an option for pain relief during labor, you will need to sign a consent form.

If you have any questions, please talk with your health care provider.