

**Report to the Boards of Health**  
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## Nitrous Oxide Abuse

### What Is Nitrous Oxide?

Nitrous oxide is a colorless gas with many legal uses. Doctors and dentists use it for pain relief and sedation. It is sold in small steel cartridges called chargers, used by the food industry. Car racers use it to boost engine power.

### Nitrous Oxide Abuse

Nitrous oxide products are increasingly being misused to get high. Sometimes nitrous oxide is inhaled from a balloon filled from a charger or tank. Street names for this type of use include “whippets”. Nitrous oxide is now sold in bright, candy-flavored tanks with names like Galaxy Gas, Goo Sticks, and others. These products may be available through smoke or vape shops, gas stations, convenience stores, online marketplaces, party-supply businesses, and novelty stores. Some are packaged with colorful designs and flavors that may make them appear similar to other consumer products and enticing to young people. Because the high seems short, many people believe it is harmless. It is not, especially when it is used repeatedly.

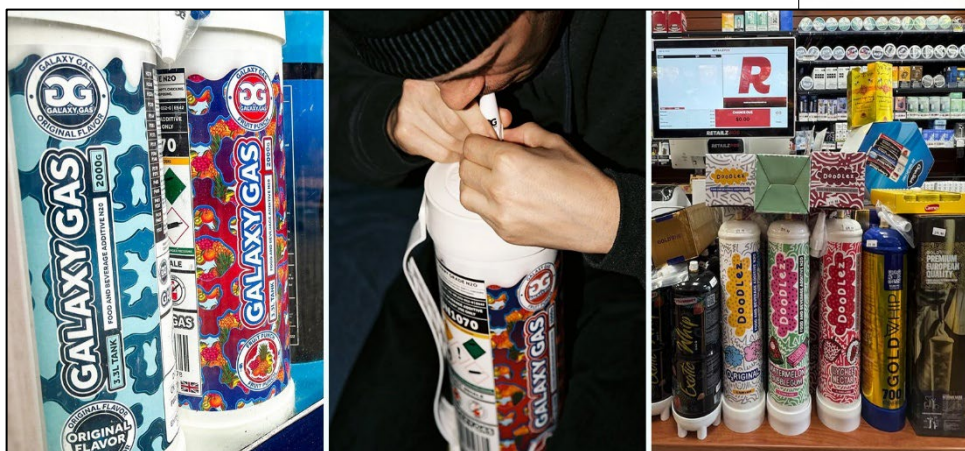
In March 2025, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) warned consumers not to inhale any flavor of nitrous oxide from any size of canister, and named several brands sold online and in smoke shops, vape shops, and gas stations. On September 15, 2026, the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) issued a public warning and a bulletin to healthcare providers. The warning came after the Michigan Poison & Drug Information Center saw a rise in both the number and the severity of injuries from nitrous oxide.

### Common Whippet-Related Items

Residents may not recognize these objects when they first begin appearing in a neighborhood.



Source: <https://candleinc.org/whippet-community-impact/>



Source: <https://www.poison.med.wayne.edu/updates-content/nitrous-oxide-dangers>

## How It Harms the Body

Heavy or repeated use of nitrous oxide is toxic to the neurologic (brain/nerves) and hematologic (blood) systems by its ability to inactivate vitamin B12. The effects can cause numbness and tingling in the hands and feet, weakness, poor balance, trouble walking, loss of bladder control, paralysis, anemia, blood clots, and strokes. Some people develop anxiety, depression, confusion, paranoia, or psychosis.

Any amount of use can cause a sudden lack of oxygen which can cause fainting, falls, and suffocation. Breathing gas straight from a tank can freeze the lips, mouth, throat, and lungs. The pressure can cause the lungs to collapse. Nitrous oxide slows reaction time, and people may think they are fine to drive when they are not. In the Netherlands, police linked nitrous oxide to about 1,800 traffic crashes over three years, including 63 deaths, before the country banned it.

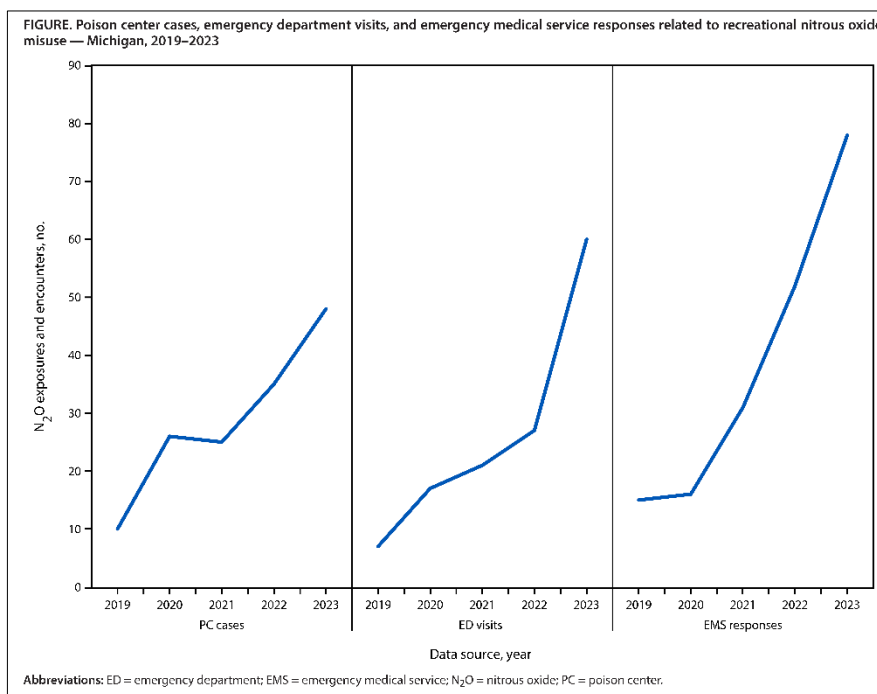
## A National Problem

Calls to U.S. poison centers for nitrous oxide rose from 28 in 2003 to 401 in 2024. More than half of these calls were due to cases of moderate or serious harm. Deaths have also increased, going from 23 in 2010 to 156 in 2023. Nitrous oxide is not routinely tested for after a death and abuse is often missed, so the true size of the issue is unknown.

## The Michigan Picture

A CDC report published in 2025 looked at Michigan data from 2019 to 2023, and every measure rose sharply. Over those five years there were 144 poison center cases, 132 emergency department visits, and 192 ambulance responses related to nitrous oxide. Fourteen of the ambulance responses during those five years involved a death.

| Michigan nitrous oxide cases | 2019 | 2023 |
|------------------------------|------|------|
| Poison center cases          | 10   | 48   |
| Emergency department visits  | 7    | 60   |
| EMS (ambulance) responses    | 15   | 78   |



## Laws and Regulation

Nitrous oxide is not a federally controlled drug. In Michigan, it is illegal to inhale it to get high, to sell it for that purpose, or to sell canisters to anyone under 18. Selling to a minor carries a civil fine of up to \$500. In 2024, Michigan also made “crackers,” the devices used to open chargers, illegal as drug paraphernalia. The canisters themselves remain legal.

One challenge is that tanks and canisters are sold as food products for whipping cream, it is hard to prove a store is selling them to people intending to misuse them. No current Michigan bill would further limit these sales. In October 2026, MDHHS shared an opinion piece by Michigan physicians calling for a higher purchase age, limits on flavored products and tank sizes, and health warnings on canisters.

Other states have gone further. Louisiana became the first state to ban retail sales in 2024. Alabama, Kentucky, Tennessee, Washington, and South Carolina have since passed laws that ban or tightly limit retail sales while protecting medical, food, and automotive uses. The United Kingdom and the Netherlands both banned recreational nitrous oxide in 2023. In Australia, New South Wales will ban retail sale of canisters larger than 10 grams starting in November 2026.

At the federal level, the Nitrous Oxide Safety Act (H.R. 7945) would ban consumer retail and online sales while protecting legitimate uses. In September 2026, the House Energy and Commerce Committee approved it by a vote of 36 to 0. It now awaits a vote by the full House. Some groups argue that bans are hard to enforce and prefer regulation and education.

### Litter

Canisters discarded improperly can lead to explosions. Check with your [local collection agency](#) to see if they can accept these compressed gas cylinders. If not they may know about local household hazardous waste drop offs. If unavailable, other producers of this waste, like medical/dental clinics, restaurants, or commercial gas cylinder suppliers may be able to help in identifying options. The Southwest Detroit Whippet WipeOut Campaign Coalition (<https://weareideal.com/whippet-wipeout-campaign/>) has worked to reduce whippet (Nitrous Oxide) abuse and littering within their community through community-based intervention methods.

### Recommendations:

- Support state and federal action to end consumer retail sales of nitrous oxide, or at minimum to ban flavored products and large tanks, raise the purchase age to 21, and require health warnings, while protecting medical, dental, food, and automotive uses.
- Encourage local healthcare providers to ask patients about nitrous oxide and inhalant use.
- Add nitrous oxide information to existing retailer education visits and to substance use education for schools, parents, and young adults (examples at <https://weareideal.com/whippet-wipeout-campaign/>).

### Resources:

- Michigan Poison & Drug Information Center: 1-800-222-1222 (free, confidential, 24/7). <https://www.poison.med.wayne.edu/updates-content/nitrous-oxide-dangers>
- MDHHS provider bulletin, Recreational Nitrous Oxide. [https://www.michigan.gov/mdhhs/-/media/Project/Websites/mdhhs/Keeping-Michigan-Healthy/Public-Health-Admin/Bulletins/CME\\_Bulletin\\_Recreational\\_Nitrous\\_Oxide.pdf](https://www.michigan.gov/mdhhs/-/media/Project/Websites/mdhhs/Keeping-Michigan-Healthy/Public-Health-Admin/Bulletins/CME_Bulletin_Recreational_Nitrous_Oxide.pdf)
- FDA. FDA Advises Consumers Not to Inhale Nitrous Oxide Products. <https://www.fda.gov/food/alerts-advisories-safety-information/fda-advises-consumers-not-inhale-nitrous-oxide-products>
- MDHHS Substance Use Disorder treatment and recovery services. <https://www.michigan.gov/SUD>

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