Using Nitrous Oxide During Labor and Delivery

What is nitrous oxide?
Nitrous oxide is a quick-acting gas that you breathe in through a mask. It is used all over the world for labor pain relief. Many dentists use it too. We call it “nitrous” for short. Most people know it as “laughing gas.”

How do I use it during labor?
Nitrous can help lessen pain and worry during labor and childbirth. It can help you feel more in control. You take it yourself when you need it. Nobody else may give it to you.

To use the gas, hold the mask to your face and start breathing in. Do this 30 seconds to a minute before a contraction. Starting before a contraction gives the gas time to work. The effect only lasts a few minutes after you take off the mask. The gas starts clearing from your body as soon as you stop breathing it in.

How can I get nitrous oxide during my labor and childbirth?
Once you decide you want to use nitrous, your labor nurse will tell your provider. Your provider will decide if it is OK for you to use it. Then your nurse will talk with you about nitrous and give you an agreement to sign. Signing the agreement means you agree to follow the safety rules for using nitrous. After you sign, the nurse will bring the nitrous equipment to your room. The nurse will set it up and teach you how to use it.

Does nitrous oxide have any side effects?
Many women have some nausea (stomach upset) with the gas. But we have medicine to help with that if you need it. Some women feel dizzy or unsteady on their feet. You should always have a support person or staff person in the room any time you:

- Get out of the chair
- Sit on the labor ball
- Are in the tub

Some women decide the side effects are not worth it and stop using the gas.

Are there any reasons I can’t use nitrous oxide?
You can’t use nitrous oxide:

1. If you can’t hold your own facemask or mouthpiece.
2. If you took an opioid or other medicines in the past 2 hours that might make you sleepy.
3. If you have pernicious anemia or lack vitamin B-12.
4. If you have one of a few other rare health problems. (If you do, your provider will talk with you about it.)
5. If you share the nitrous oxide with others. (You have to agree in writing not to share the gas.)
6. If the nitrous machines are not ready.
Will nitrous oxide affect my labor or my baby?

No. There are no bad effects on labor or the baby. Nitrous does not affect your contractions or your baby’s health. You can keep moving around in the room as long as someone is with you.

You can use the gas right up until you have your baby. You will still be able to push.

Do I have to choose between nitrous oxide or an epidural or other IV pain medicine?

You can use nitrous oxide before you have an epidural. But you can’t use them together. It’s perfectly fine to start with nitrous and then switch to an epidural or other IV pain medicines. You can’t have certain IV medicines at the same time as nitrous. This could make you too sleepy, and you could stop breathing.

What if I have more questions?

Please talk with your OB provider or nurse to learn more.

You can also visit www.childbirthconnection.org.