

Nitrous Oxide (Laughing Gas)...

JACQUES DOUECK, DDS

When I broke the news to my father that we no longer had laughing gas because of the danger to the dentist and dental assistant, he, well, laughed. Many patients, like my father, find that nitrous oxide (laughing gas) takes the edge off their dental work. In fact, once we ran out of gas, and my father politely got up and rescheduled for another day.

When I have to explain to patients that we no longer administer nitrous oxide, the reaction is always the same: they think I'm kidding. Then, I show them the research articles or explain why we no longer have it, and they immediately understand.

A number of studies have been conducted examining the effects of laughing gas, including a large scale study by Ellis Cohen and colleagues, involving 60,000 health care workers and many of their spouses. The results were startling. In offices where nitrous oxide is used more than 8 hours per week, there was a two-fold increase in serious liver, kidney and neurological diseases and other serious health risks.

Nitrous oxide has long been considered safe for children and adults. However, Dr. Robert J. Henry of the University of Florida's College of dentistry, who has done

IT'S NO LAUGHING MATTER!



extensive clinical research on the effects of nitrous oxide, noted that “dental employees who are chronically exposed to low levels of the gas show a general assortment of neurological symptoms, including numbness, abnormal skin sensations and failure of muscular coordination – sometimes mimicking the symptoms of multiple sclerosis.”

The gas poses no danger to the patient, but Dr. Henry's studies emphasize the need to protect dental workers from the cumulative effects of long-term, daily exposure to laughing gas, which may increase

their risks of several serious health problems.

If you are a fearful patient and your dentist no longer uses laughing gas, here are some tips. Wear comfortable clothing, and avoid tight collars. Ask the dentist or hygienist to explain each step. Knowledge helps you gain control and feel more comfortable. During the visit, practice relaxation techniques. Focus on the music. If you practice deep, slow, rhythmic breathing while counting each breath as you go along, you will find yourself far more relaxed and at ease in the patient's chair.