

YOUR GOOD HEALTH

Laughing through Labor

Nitrous oxide during childbirth is catching on at some hospitals

By **JoAnne Viviano**

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As Shana French felt her labor pains coming, she grabbed a mask in the delivery room and placed it over her face, inhaling a gas usually reserved for the dentist's office.

Tanks of nitrous oxide, more commonly called laughing gas, are beginning to make an appearance in more labor and delivery rooms across the United States.

The gas primarily had been used for dental procedures and pediatric care in the United States until the U.S. Food and Drug Administration in 2012 approved a new machine for use in birthing rooms, said Dr. Kasey Fiorini, an anesthesiologist at Ohio State University's Wexner Medical Center.

"In just the past couple years, use has expanded quite a bit," Fiorini said. Ohio State has offered nitrous oxide for labor pains since November. For now, it is the only hospital system in the area to offer it.

Fiorini said she first heard about nitrous oxide in 2013 when she was a resident training at the University of North Carolina. In 2014, five maternity centers in the country were using it. This year, about 300 are.

Fiorini said nitrous oxide has been popular in the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia for years. Popularity is rising here as more women become interested in having a low-intervention birth.

French's son, Blaise, was born at Ohio State on Dec. 4.

She said the nitrous oxide helped her handle the pain that came with all but her last contractions. She said she wouldn't have delivered the infant any other way.

Along with nitrous oxide, women delivering babies at Ohio State are offered epidurals and intravenous

pain medication. People generally don't get good relief from IV pain medication, Fiorini said, and it can make moms sleepy or nauseated. Epidurals, which deliver pain relief to the lower half of the body, are the best way to control pain.

But nitrous oxide is a good option for people who must avoid an epidural for medical reasons, don't have time for one or want to avoid one, perhaps because they want a natural birth — an epidural is more invasive — or because they don't want to risk the temporary numbness that it can cause in their legs.

"It provides a little pain relief," Fiorini said of nitrous oxide. "It definitely makes people feel less anx-

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— Shana French
”

ious about pain.”

Expectation is key, she added. As long as patients know that nitrous oxide won't eliminate pain but rather will reduce the anxiety surrounding contractions, it's a good option. And the gas wears off quickly, within a couple of breaths, so moms are feeling the effects of the medication only when they need it.

French also used a birthing tub filled with warm water. She said the tub eased early contractions and relaxed her. As her pain increased, she opted for the laughing gas.

She said she quickly learned to reach for the mask just as a contraction started and remove it just before it peaked. That allowed the gas to do its job through the toughest part of the pain.

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BIGSTOCK

tion," French said. "Then I was able to wait it out until the next one came without stressing out."

French said she did not want to use IV pain medication because she was concerned it would make her baby sluggish. And she didn't want an epidural because she worried it would make it more difficult to push her baby through the birth canal.

Dr. Laura Goetzl of the American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists said nitrous oxide had been used more in the past, but with the advent of epidurals, "pain control in labor got (a) little more medicalized."

Now, she said, people want more choices. Midwives, she said, are among those in the vanguard of using nitrous oxide and, as more centers use it successfully, it is catching on.

"Some people don't want to have a pain-free labor," said Goetzl, a professor of obstetrics, gynecology and reproductive sciences at Temple University's Lewis Katz School of Medicine. "They just want something to take the edge off so that they can avoid an epidural analgesic."

Fiorini said data in other countries where nitrous oxide is used give no indication of any harmful effect on babies.

At Ohio State, a handful of new moms have used the gas, Fiorini said, and patients have been responding positively.

"It's really just about providing another option," she said. "It's a reasonable option for people, so it's something we want to have available for them."

— *JoAnne Viviano is a health and medicine reporter for the Columbus (Ohio) Dispatch. She can be reached at jjviviano@dispatch.com or followed on Twitter at [@JoAnneViviano](https://twitter.com/JoAnneViviano).*

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