



# Washington Regional Threat and Analysis Center

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## Information Bulletin

<b>TITLE</b> <b>Helium Suicides</b>	<b>SERIES NUMBER</b> <b>2010-274</b>
<b>Day Month Year</b> <b>Thursday, October 14, 2010</b>	<b>DISTRIBUTION</b> <b>First Responders</b>

**Purpose and Scope:** To provide first responders and investigators information on an emerging suicide method which may be difficult to recognize forensically as a suicide and has implications for responder safety.

### Key Points:

- Helium is nearly undetectable in toxicological probes, and it can be difficult to recognize the signs of helium suicides. This is important information for officers investigating unexplained deaths.
- The use of hazardous gasses in suicide attempts poses a threat to first responders.

**Background:** The Los Angeles Joint Regional Terrorism Threat Assessment Center (LAJRIC) distributed a public safety bulletin on an emerging suicide method using helium and an “exit hood.” Helium suicides are still relatively rare however, in the last several years, information about the use of helium as a certain, fast, and painless suicide method has spread on the Internet and in various suicide handbooks. First responders have encountered helium suicides and other variations of this suicide method using chemicals which are hazardous to first responders in the District or National Capitol Region. The WRTAC is issuing the below information for situational awareness and investigative purposes only.

### Helium Suicide Synopsis

Helium suicides also known as an “exit bag suicide” is a device consisting of a large, clear plastic bag with a cord used to commit suicide. It is simple to make at home or can be bought over the internet. It is usually used in conjunction with an inert gas like helium or nitrogen, which prevents the panic, sense of suffocation and struggling even when unconscious (the hypercapnic alarm response) caused by the deprivation of oxygen in the presence of carbon dioxide. It also makes the method of death difficult to trace if the bag and gas canister are removed before the death is reported. Helium is nearly undetectable in toxicological probes, an important feature for individuals assisting suicides due to the possibility of criminal charges. Assisted suicide is legal in Oregon, Washington, and Montana.



Simulated Exit Bag Suicide

**Exit bag with nitrogen** – Using an exit bag with helium may cause a twitching in the arms and legs. Nitrogen is more physiological than helium and less likely to lead to body movements during dying. The exit bag with nitrogen uses the same technique as the exit bag with helium, however this method requires purchasing empty LPG cylinders or barbeque gas bottles with compressed nitrogen and then regulating the bottles with a jet assembly into the standard plastic “exit bag”.

### **Indicators of a Helium Suicide**

The plastic exit bag and its components can all be purchased on line or at your local toy or party store. The “Helium Exit Kit” can be purchased online. Some individuals have used plastic bags as an improvised hood. The presence of these items at the scene should alert first responders to a potential suicide involving helium. In an assisted suicide these items may be removed by an attending individual making the scene difficult to assess. The exit bag used with nitrogen may cause the skin of the victim to discolor, possibly a dark red discoloration of the skin. Discolored skin can indicate that the skin damage was produced by cold due to liquid nitrogen before death.

Equipment used in Helium Suicides includes:

- Plastic tubing (standard 2.1m oxygen tubing with soft connectors)
- Quick release air-line fitting that attaches to helium cylinder
- Gas Jet Regulator
- Pressure Gauge for testing cylinder
- Plastic Exit Bag



Nitrogen Tank



Helium Balloon Party Tank



Helium Tanks



Plastic oxygen Tubing



Pressure Gauge



Plastic Exit Bag

### **Effects of Helium and Nitrogen Exposure on First Responders**

**Helium** – Helium suicides poses a low risk to first responders because helium quickly dissipates in well-ventilated areas. However, helium released in poorly-ventilated, enclosed or confined spaces however, may pose some danger to first responders.

Symptoms of oxygen deficiency due to helium exposure include:

- respiratory difficulty
- ringing in the ears
- headache
- shortness of breath
- and, at high concentrations, unconsciousness and death.

**Nitrogen** - Rapid release of nitrogen gas into an enclosed space can displace oxygen, and therefore represents an asphyxiation hazard. This may happen with few warning symptoms.

Symptoms of oxygen deficiency to do nitrogen include:

- nitrogen narcosis, a temporary semi-anesthetized state of mental impairment
- headache
- dizziness

- fatigue
- nausea,
- euphoria
- becoming unconscious without warning

First responders are encouraged to follow their agencies' hazardous materials operational protocols and procedures, take appropriate personal protection measures including respiratory protection, and request assistance from appropriate HazMat entities.

### **Safety and Precautions**

- Although helium is non-flammable, containers may explode when heated and ruptured cylinders may rocket
- Keep out of low areas ie: floors, basements. Many gases are heavier than air and will spread along around and collect in low or confined areas.
- Ventilate closed spaces before entering
- Stay upwind
- Wear positive pressure self-contained breathing apparatus
- Structural firefighters protective clothing will only provide limited protection

### **Spill or Leak**

- Do not touch or walk through spilled material
- Stop leak if you can do it without risk
- If possible, turn leaking containers so that gas escapes rather than liquid
- Prevent entry into waterways, sewers, basements or confined areas
- Allow substance to evaporate
- Ventilate the area

### **First Aid**

- Move victim to fresh air
- Give artificial respiration if victim is not breathing
- Administer oxygen if breathing is difficult
- Keep victim warm and quiet
- Ensure that medical personnel are aware of the material(s) involved and take precautions to protect themselves

### **Resources**

<http://www.finalexit.org/>

[http://www.fsijournal.org/article/0379-0738\(95\)01798-4/abstract](http://www.fsijournal.org/article/0379-0738(95)01798-4/abstract)

<http://www.slideshare.net/jonnieSuicide/hypoxicdeathandtheexitbag>

<http://environmentalchemistry.com/yogi/hazmat/erg/gn/121.html>

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