

Why Not Inhale Helium?

It would be hard to find anyone who hasn't sucked back a quick inhale of helium from a helium filled balloon and had a good laugh along with the rest of the crowd at the party - singing or talking until the helium was exhausted from your lungs. By replacing the air in your lungs with helium you can in effect change the sound or pitch that emanates when you speak. Although inhaling helium is fun it's not exactly healthy. Inhaling helium means you are not inhaling air, and air is what we humans need to live.

Breathing in pure helium deprives the body of oxygen, as if you were holding your breath. If you couldn't breathe at all, you'd start to die in minutes - as soon as your body exhausted the supply of oxygen stored in the blood. But helium speeds up the process: When the gas fills your lungs, it creates a diffusion gradient that washes out the oxygen. In other words, each breath of helium you take sucks more oxygen out of your system. After inhaling helium, the body's oxygen level can plummet to a hazardous level in a matter seconds. In some cases dizziness can occur or even blackouts but this does not even begin to address the effects on the brain.

Though your brain only accounts for 2 percent of your body mass, it uses 20 percent of all the oxygen you breathe. The amount of oxygen used by particular areas of the brain can actually change due to damage from lack of oxygen in those areas.

Of more concern is the danger of inhaling helium directly from a high pressure tank. Besides the serious risk of lung damage due to hemorrhaging or bursting lungs, bubbles of helium could wind up in the arteries that lead to the brain. This can lead to stroke-like symptoms called cerebral gas embolism or worse, death.

The Balloon and Party Goods Industry which includes balloon artists/entertainers, party stores, and all balloon retail outlets have always felt responsible for educating customers about the hazards of inhaling helium for this reason. As an industry we want everyone to enjoy the atmosphere and fun that balloons provide in a safe and responsible manner.

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The Dangers of Helium Inhalation by Daniel Engber, Slate Magazine
Did Donald Duck Inhale Helium? How Helium Works by kidzworld.com
Test Your Brain Facts IQ! Monica Gomez, Beachbody.com