

Fact Sheet

Cocaine

What is cocaine?

Cocaine is a stimulant drug, which means it speeds up the messages going between the brain and the body.

Other common names

Some common names for cocaine include C, coke, nose candy, snow, white lady, toot, Charlie, blow, white dust and stardust.

Effects of cocaine

The effects of any drug vary from person to person. How they affect a person depends on many things including their size, weight and health, whether they are accustomed to taking the drug, whether other drugs are present in their body, and the amount taken.

There is no safe level of drug use. Use of any drug always carries some risk and can produce unwanted side effects.

Low to moderate doses

The effects of cocaine can last anywhere from a few minutes to two hours, depending on how the cocaine is taken. When the immediate 'rush' of the cocaine has worn off, the person may experience a 'crash'. Some of the effects that may be experienced after taking cocaine include:

- › feelings of euphoria and invincibility, more likely to take risks
- › increased confidence and talkativeness or quiet contemplation and rapture
- › feelings of great physical strength and mental capacity
- › increased libido
- › anxiety, agitation, paranoia and panic
- › unpredictable, violent and aggressive behaviour
- › feeling more awake
- › increased performance on simple tasks
- › enlarged (dilated) pupils
- › dry mouth
- › increased breathing rate, blood pressure and heart rate (after initial slowing)
- › reduced appetite
- › increased body temperature
- › indifference to pain.

Higher doses

A high dose of cocaine can cause a person to overdose. Not knowing the strength or purity of the cocaine increases the risk of overdose. Injecting cocaine also increases this risk due to large amounts of the drug entering the blood stream and quickly travelling to the brain.

The effects of higher doses of cocaine can include:

- › anxiety or paranoia
- › tremors and muscle twitches
- › nausea and vomiting
- › sleep disorders
- › rapid and weak pulse
- › chest pain or heart attack
- › kidney failure
- › hypothermia (low body temperature) or increased body temperature
- › seizures
- › brain haemorrhage
- › coma and death.

High doses and frequent heavy use can also cause a 'cocaine psychosis', characterised by paranoid delusions, hallucinations and unusual, aggressive or violent behaviour. These symptoms usually disappear a few days after the person stops using cocaine.

Coming down

As the effects of cocaine begin to wear off, a person may experience:

- › tension and anxiety
- › depression
- › radical mood swings
- › total exhaustion.

Long-term effects

Long-term effects of cocaine use include:

- › insomnia and exhaustion
- › depression
- › anxiety, paranoia and psychosis
- › eating disorders and weight loss
- › sexual dysfunction
- › hypertension and irregular heart beat
- › sensitivity to light and sound
- › hallucinations.

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Some other long-term effects of cocaine are related to the method of using cocaine:

- › Repeated snorting damages the nasal lining and the structure separating the nostrils (the nasal septum).
- › Smoking crack cocaine can cause breathing difficulties, chronic cough, bronchitis and other respiratory problems.
- › Cocaine is often 'cut' with substances that are toxic when injected. They can cause collapsed veins, abscesses and damage to the heart, liver and brain.
- › If injected into the skin, cocaine causes severe vasoconstriction, which may prevent blood flowing to the tissue, potentially resulting in severe tissue damage.

Using cocaine with other drugs

If cocaine is taken with a depressant that slows down the messages between the brain and body such as alcohol, the body is put under a lot of stress as it tries to deal with the competing effects. Using alcohol or other drugs such as benzodiazepines after cocaine use to help with the symptoms of the 'come down' can lead to a cycle of dependence on both drugs.

Using other stimulants such as ecstasy with cocaine can increase the risk of overdose.

Pregnancy and breastfeeding

Cocaine can be passed on to an unborn baby through the placenta, or to an infant in breast milk. This could harm the baby and increase the chances of going into labour early.

Effects on work

Under occupational health and safety legislation, all employees have a responsibility to make sure they look after their own and their co-workers' safety.

The effects of cocaine such as over-confidence and feelings of invincibility can affect a person's ability to work safely and effectively. The symptoms of coming down and withdrawal can also affect a person's ability to work safely and effectively.

Tolerance and dependence

There is evidence that after prolonged use cocaine can lead to dependence. People who are dependent on cocaine find they crave the drug and it becomes far more important than other activities in their life.

Dependence on cocaine can be psychological, physical, or both. People who are psychologically dependent on cocaine may feel an urge to use it when they are in specific surroundings or socialising with friends. Physical dependence occurs when a person's body adapts to cocaine and gets used to functioning with the cocaine present.

Withdrawal

If a dependent person stops taking cocaine, they may experience withdrawal symptoms, including:

- › cravings for cocaine
- › agitation
- › depression or anxiety
- › extreme fatigue and exhaustion
- › disturbed sleep
- › angry outbursts.

Getting help

If your use of cocaine is affecting your health, family, relationships, work, school, financial or other life situation, you should seek help.

A good place to start is with your local doctor who is likely to know your medical history. Your doctor can give you information, a referral to a treatment service and ongoing treatment after specialist alcohol and other drug treatment is completed.

Another option is self-referral. Many treatment services allow this and you can contact them directly.

Further information

The DrugInfo website (www.druginfo.adf.org.au) has information on:

- › Support services in your state or territory
- › Treatment options
- › Free resources on cocaine.

The Australian Drug Information Network website (www.adin.com.au) has further information about self-referral treatment services.



druginfo.adf.org.au



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