

is for
cocaine

THE
STRAIGHT
DOPE

What is cocaine and how is it used?

Cocaine is a stimulant. This means it gets you up and keeps you going. Unlike speed, cocaine is a natural stimulant extracted from the leaf of the coca bush.

Historically, in the U.S., pure cocaine was used as a mild anesthetic, primarily by dentists and ear-nose-throat specialists. Cocaine is also what the "Coca" originally stood for in Coca-Cola but the cocaine was eventually replaced by caffeine.

On the street today, you don't get pure cocaine. Instead, to increase profits, a variety of cuts are added. These can include lactose (which makes you go to the bathroom), local anesthetics such as procaine (which makes you lose feeling), and heroin (rarely) or other drugs.

People use cocaine in various ways. It is sniffed, snorted through a straw or rolled up dollar bill, injected into a vein (mainlining) and smoked (freebasing). Crack cocaine has become a more common form of freebasing (See additional pamphlet for information on Crack).

Cocaine is a short-lived, intense high. How quickly you get high depends on how you take it, the purity of the drug and how much of it you do. Smoking is the quickest method. Generally, it takes three minutes when snorted, thirty seconds when injected, and only a few seconds when smoked.

Effects, Tolerance and Addiction

When cocaine enters the body, it moves rapidly from the bloodstream to the central nervous system where it affects the various reward/pleasure centers of your brain– including an important pleasure chemical, dopamine. Dopamine and these parts of your brain aid with thought organization, concentration, fine motor control, sex drive and energy. Cocaine initially increases all these functions. Eventually though, as cocaine use increases, the brain's natural receptor sites reduce or lose their ability to produce dopamine and other chemicals. This can cause feelings of depression or a "crash". These sites are not permanently damaged and will begin functioning again after you stop using cocaine, although it may take awhile depending on how long you used for.

Your body responds to cocaine use in other ways such as increased heart rate, blood pressure and breathing. Cocaine also increases alertness, stamina and feelings of euphoria while reducing fatigue, a desire to sleep and hunger. This allows some people to work, dance or take care of business with little to no sleep. Also, the more you use cocaine, the greater your tolerance will be. Tolerance means your body needs an increasing amount of cocaine in order to get high.

Regular, heavy use of cocaine can result in anxiety, depression, nausea, agitation, insomnia, weight loss, loss of sex drive and compulsive behavior. Some users may become psychologically dependent on the effects of the drug and form a habit.

Risks and Preventing Them

While there are pleasurable aspects of doing cocaine, there are also health risks involved. You can reduce the harm involved with using cocaine by considering how you use and incorporating some of the following hints into your use.

Injecting with anything other than sterile or undeniably personal injection equipment increases the risk of HIV (and other blood-borne) infections. Injecting repeatedly (as is common with cocaine) in the same site increases the likelihood of abscesses (infections which show as hard, warm lumps at the injection site and are tender to the touch) and may also cause vein, nerve or cartilage damage.

- Use a sharp, sterile syringe each time you inject.
- Do not share any paraphernalia (including syringes and stems) to avoid the transmission of HIV, hepatitis, TB and other infectious diseases.
- Use alcohol pads on the injection site before fixing.
- Rotate your injection sites.
- Take your time and make sure you're in a vein before you inject.
- For bruising of veins and tissue, apply Arnica tincture or cream (available at herb stores).

Risks and Preventing Them

Skin popping or muscling cocaine greatly increases the risk of abscesses. Cocaine, like speed, is not easily absorbed into the tissue. Injecting also causes a darkened discoloration of the skin (at the injection site) due to the "burning" of the cocaine on contact with the sensitive tissue under the skin. Cocaine causes veins to constrict and leads to a loss of blood in the area where you inject which also causes damage to tissues.

- Skin popping or muscling is not advisable. If you do, however, then immediately apply hot water with a wash cloth or compress to prevent an abscess and infection.

Smoking can result in lung and throat damage, stroke, abnormal heart rhythms and extremely high blood pressure. It can result in cut lips (especially smoking with a broken glass stem) which increases the risk of contracting infectious diseases such as HIV and/or hepatitis. Sharing pipes or stems can transmit herpes and/or TB as well.

- Cover the mouthpiece of the stem with tape or rubber to avoid cuts or heat burns.

Snorting causes nasal damage by deteriorating the mucous membranes of the septum (the main cartilage in the nose). Long-term use may eat a hole through your septum.

Risks and Preventing Them

Crashing

Most people experience an intense crash after using cocaine that involves physical exhaustion, cold-like symptoms, depression and anxiety.

- Acupuncture – especially 5-point detox modality – can help stabilize and balance damaged neurotransmitter production sites due to overuse of cocaine or amphetamines.
- Using a small amount of Valium can take the edge off of crashing. If you use Valium, use small amounts and beware that using Valium has its own tolerance and side effects to consider. Skullcap and Valerian Root tinctures or pills are herbal alternatives.
- Eat, sleep and drink plenty of water and juice, even if you are not hungry and especially if you've been on a binge.

High doses of cocaine can cause extreme anxiety and paranoia that may lead to intense social withdrawal or trigger violent behavior. It is important to note that cocaine does not necessarily cause the violence as much as releases the inhibitions that suppress existing underlying feelings. Likewise, for people with existing mental health disorders, cocaine may cause the condition to become more severe.

Risks and Preventing Them

Overdose

A cocaine overdose is the result of the heart speeding up too fast and causing a heart attack or stroke. The clearest sign that someone is overdosing is that his or her face turns blue. They may also look very pale, be very limp, are able to breathe and look at you but not able to talk. Breathing and pulse (heart rate) may be slow and shallow and may stop altogether. They may foam at the mouth, vomit, shake or have a seizure, complain of chest pain, pressure, tightness or shortness of breath or suddenly collapse and become unconscious.

- Sample the cocaine (particularly if you plan on injecting). For example, do half a hit or inject the hit extra slowly. **Do this especially when the drug is from a new source or if you haven't used for a while and your tolerance is down.**
- Mixing cocaine with opiates (known as speedballing) increases the risk of overdose because the body is receiving two very different messages: hurry up and slow down.

Overdoses are very serious but do not have to be fatal. Often, the difference between life and death depends on who is around and what actions she or he take to care for a person who has overdosed. If you see someone exhibiting the symptoms above, **call 911!**



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The Straight Dope Education Series

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