

Cocaine

What is cocaine?

Cocaine is a stimulant drug, which means that it speeds up the messages travelling between the brain and the rest of the body.

Cocaine comes from the leaves of the coca bush (*Erythroxylum coca*), which is native to South America. The leaf extract is processed to produce 3 different forms of cocaine:

- **Cocaine hydrochloride:** a white, crystalline powder with a bitter, numbing taste. Cocaine hydrochloride is often mixed, or 'cut', with other substances such as lactose and glucose, to dilute it before being sold.
- **Freebase:** a white powder that is more pure with less impurity than cocaine hydrochloride.
- **Crack:** crystals ranging in colour from white or cream to transparent with a pink or yellow hue, it may contain impurities.

Other names

C, coke, nose candy, snow, white lady, toot, Charlie, blow, white dust or stardust.

How is it used?

Cocaine hydrochloride is most commonly snorted. It can also be injected, rubbed into the gums, added to drinks or food.

Freebase and crack cocaine are usually smoked.

Indigenous people of South America have traditionally chewed the leaves of the coca bush, or brewed them as a tea, for use as a stimulant or appetite suppressant.

Effects of cocaine

There is no safe level of drug use. Use of any drug always carries some risk. It's important to be careful when taking any type of drug.

Cocaine affects everyone differently, based on:

- Size, weight and health
- Whether the person is used to taking it
- Whether other drugs are taken around the same time
- The amount taken
- The strength of the drug (varies from batch to batch)

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The following effects may be experienced:

- Happiness and confidence
- Talking more
- Feeling energetic and alert
- Quiet contemplation and rapture
- Feeling physically strong and mentally sharp
- Reduced appetite
- Dry mouth
- Enlarged (dilated) pupils
- Higher blood pressure and faster heartbeat and breathing (after initial slowing)
- Higher body temperature
- Increased sex drive
- Unpredictable, violent or aggressive behaviour
- Indifference to pain

Overdose

If a large amount or a strong batch is taken, it could also cause an overdose. If any of the following effects are experienced an ambulance should be called straight away by dialling triple zero (000). Ambulance officers don't need to involve the police.

- Nausea and vomiting
- Extreme anxiety
- Chest pain
- Panic
- Extreme agitation and paranoia
- Hallucinations
- Tremors
- Breathing irregularities
- Kidney failure
- Seizures
- Stroke and heart problems
- Coma and death

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

Injecting cocaine and sharing needles may also cause:

- Increased likelihood of overdose
- Tetanus
- Hepatitis B
- Hepatitis C
- HIV/AIDS

Coming down

In the days after cocaine use, the following may be experienced:

- Tension and anxiety
- Depression
- Mood swings
- Total exhaustion

High doses and frequent heavy use can also cause 'cocaine psychosis'.

Long-term effects

Regular use of cocaine may eventually cause:

- Insomnia and exhaustion
- Depression
- Anxiety, paranoia and psychosis
- Eating disorders and weight loss
- Sexual dysfunction
- Kidney failure
- Hypertension and irregular heartbeat
- Sensitivity to light and sound
- Hallucinations
- Heart disease and death

Snorting cocaine regularly can also cause:

- Runny nose and nose bleeds
- Infection of the nasal membranes
- Perforation of the septum
- Long term damage to the nasal cavity and sinuses

Withdrawal

Giving up cocaine after using it for a long time is challenging because the body has to get used to functioning without it. It's therefore important to talk to your GP or another health professional before trying to give up.

Phases of withdrawal

Withdrawal symptoms usually start around 1-2 days after last use and can last for approximately 10 weeks – days 4 to 7 will be the worst.

Withdrawal usually happens in 3 phases:

1. Crash – agitation, depression or anxiety, intense hunger, cocaine cravings, restless sleep, extreme tiredness (experienced in the first few days).
2. Withdrawal – cocaine cravings, lack of energy, anxiety, angry outbursts and an inability to feel pleasure (can last for up to 10 weeks).
3. Extinction – intermittent cravings for cocaine (ongoing).

Withdrawal symptoms usually start around 1-2 days after last use and can last for approximately 10 weeks.

Further Information

The Druginfo website has information on:

- Help & support services
- Treatment
- Withdrawal
- References for this fact sheet

Go to druginfo.adf.org.au

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Level 12, 607 Bourke Street, Melbourne
PO Box 818 North Melbourne Victoria Australia 3051

Email druginfo@adf.org.au Telephone **1300 85 85 84**

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