

WHAT IT IS

Cocaine is a powerful drug that comes from the leaves of the coca bush, a plant grown in South America. It's sold as a white powder that is most often snorted (inhaled through the nostrils), but it can also be dissolved in water and injected, or formed into a solid to be smoked. The cocaine you can buy on the street is rarely pure; often, it's mixed with other substances, like talcum powder or dextrose, or with other drugs, like amphetamines.

Heating cocaine hydrochloride and combining it with baking soda makes crack cocaine, a very strong form of cocaine that can be smoked. Crack is divided up into many tiny "rocks" that are sold for \$10 to \$20 each. This makes crack a fairly cheap drug, per dose. But because the high doesn't last long and is addictive, people will take many doses in a short time, making cocaine or crack a very expensive drug habit. It's no wonder less than 1% of Canadians over the age of 15 use cocaine.

WHAT IT DOES

Cocaine stimulates your central nervous system, making you feel alert, full of energy, and euphoric. You start to feel the effects right away, and they can last a few minutes or hours.

Taking cocaine can also make you feel agitated, violent, paranoid, and delirious, and will probably make your heart rate speed up, make you breathe faster, and increase your blood pressure and temperature.

SHORT-TERM EFFECTS

You can overdose on cocaine the first time you try it. You go into respiratory arrest, meaning you stop breathing and may die. This is most likely to happen if you've also taken a depressant drug, like heroin. Smoking cocaine or crack cocaine can damage your lungs. Plus, when people share needles to inject cocaine, they are at risk of contracting HIV and hepatitis. For pregnant women, using cocaine often leads to complications, such as miscarriage and premature birth.

And just so you know: unlawful possession of cocaine is a criminal offense. Trafficking, making, importing, and exporting cocaine are indictable offences punishable by up to life imprisonment.

LONG-TERM EFFECTS

Over the long run, cocaine use produces several frightening side effects. Because cocaine targets your brain, it can cause lasting damage to your brain and nervous system. Your memory and attention span may be affected. Cocaine use puts you at risk of having a fatal stroke, and regular cocaine use damages the tissue around your heart, making you more susceptible to heart attacks.

You can also damage your nasal cavities if you inhale cocaine through your nostrils, leading to constant or severe nosebleeds. You will likely be more prone to headaches and constipation than people who don't use cocaine.

ADDICTION

Cocaine is one of the most addictive drugs, and you're at risk of becoming addicted the very first time you try it. Using cocaine regularly makes you tolerant to the drug - you need more and more of it to feel high. And tolerance leads to addiction. When you try to cut down or stop using the drug, you'll feel symptoms of withdrawal that include depression, moodiness, a feeling of low energy, and a general loss of pleasure in your regular life. You'll feel these symptoms even between uses, which makes you crave it even more. Intense craving for the drug continues for many months after you stop using it.

Cocaine can take over your life. The longer you use cocaine regularly, the more your life becomes focused on finding and buying the drug. You stop caring about your health, so you lose weight and become malnourished and susceptible to illness. Plus, the expense of a cocaine habit often leads to breaking the law or taking dangerous risks to try to get money.

REDUCING THE RISKS

- Cocaine used in large doses can be deadly. Small infrequent doses are still risky.
- Regular cocaine use increases the likelihood of addiction.
- Never use needles to inject drugs—you increase the risk of acquiring a fatal disease.

BET YOU DIDN'T KNOW

In the late 1800s, when it was first on the market, Coca-Cola contained small amounts of cocaine. The "Coca" in its name comes from cocaine. But soon people started to realize that cocaine was harmful and addictive, and by 1929, the drink was 100% cocaine-free.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

1. It has been said, "It is not what a young person *does* while using drugs, it is what he or she does *not do*." What do you think this statement means?
2. What are some of the illegal or dangerous things a person might do to get a drug like cocaine?
3. Studies show people addicted to cocaine often live in concentrated areas, like Vancouver's downtown east side. Why do you think this might be?

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