

COCAINE

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW



Australian Government
Department of Health

WHAT IS COCAINE?

Cocaine is a short-acting stimulant and takes effect by increasing the amount of several neurotransmitters (brain chemicals) such as dopamine, serotonin and norepinephrine.¹⁻³ Cocaine is produced from the leaves of the *Erythroxylon coca* plant, which is native to South America.^{2,4} Traditionally, the leaves were chewed. The active component was isolated, purified and named cocaine in 1860.⁵

Cocaine comes in three main forms: a paste, cocaine hydrochloride (powder) and crack cocaine (a white or off-white crystal rock which is normally smoked).^{2,6} In Australia, cocaine is most common in its powder form (which is usually white or off-white) and is normally sold in 'points' (0.1g) or grams. It's most often taken by snorting, although it's sometimes taken in other ways including injecting.^{7,8} It is often sold cut (mixed) with other white powder substances, which reduce the purity and can also be harmful to the user.

Cocaine is also known as coke, blow, charlie, C, candy, dust, flake, nose candy, snow, white, white lady, crack, rock, freebase.

HOW MANY PEOPLE USE COCAINE?

Cocaine use is low in Australia. According to the 2016 National Drug Strategy Household Survey, less than three in every one hundred (2.5%) Australians (aged 14 or over) had used it in the last 12 months.

EFFECTS OF COCAINE

When snorted or injected, cocaine quickly produces an intense 'rush', with the purity and the amount of the drug taken determining its intensity.

Cocaine can have the following effects:^{5,10}

- **Dilated (enlarged) pupils**
- **Increased heart rate (tachycardia) and blood pressure**
- **Increased breathing rate**
- **Increased body temperature**
- **Increased energy, talkativeness and confidence**
- **A feeling of euphoria (a 'high')**
- **Reduced appetite**
- **Anxiety**
- **Irritability, agitation, aggression**
- **Paranoia (feeling extremely suspicious and frightened)**
- **Headaches**
- **Dizziness**
- **Nausea, vomiting**
- **Insomnia**
- **Low mood, depression, cravings (during the 'comedown'/crash)**
- **Psychosis (a serious mental illness that causes people to misinterpret or confuse reality)**

The rush doesn't last very long — usually only 30–45 minutes, if snorted.⁵ Users may experience a 'comedown' or a 'crash' the next day.

WHAT IS THE 'COMEDOWN' PHASE OR 'CRASH'?

Users often experience a 'comedown' phase, or 'crash', when the drug starts to wear off. This can last a few days and symptoms can include:¹¹

- **Feeling uncomfortable**
- **Lethargy (having little or no energy or motivation)**
- **Irritability**
- **Paranoia**

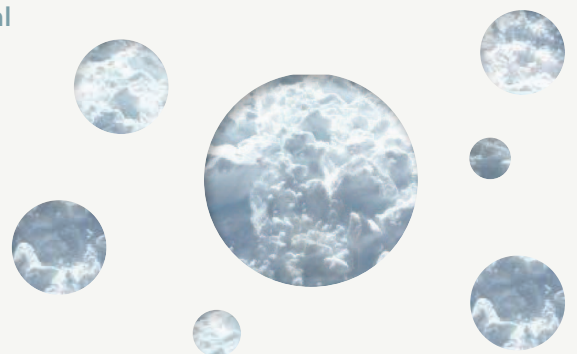
People who are dependent on (addicted to) cocaine may experience unpleasant symptoms for longer. These are called withdrawals (see further on in the factsheet).

WHAT ARE THE RISKS?

Some of the effects of cocaine can be unpleasant or even dangerous, especially among people with pre-existing problems or susceptibilities (e.g. heart conditions that users may or may not be aware of). Risks associated with cocaine use are common to all stimulant drugs, as they have similar effects on the body. The risks and effects of using cocaine can include:^{5, 10, 12}

Physical health risks:

- **Increased heart rate and blood pressure — this is extremely dangerous for people with pre-existing problems (e.g. high blood pressure or heart disease). This risk is even greater when used with other drugs that have stimulant effects (e.g. ecstasy or ice)**
- **Rapid and/or irregular breathing**
- **Nausea, vomiting**
- **Dizziness, headaches**
- **Tremors, muscle twitches**
- **Abdominal pain**
- **Worsening of asthma symptoms (for asthma sufferers)**
- **Other cardiovascular (heart) problems such as chest pains, palpitations, an irregular heartbeat (arrhythmia), heart attacks and permanent heart damage**
- **Vasospasm, where the vascular system can start to spasm (this can happen at very low doses and can be fatal)**
- **Reduced appetite (if used regularly over a period of time, users may become malnourished)**
- **Insomnia**
- **If injected, cocaine use is associated with vein problems, abscesses (swollen pus-filled areas of body tissue), bacterial infections such as endocarditis (a life-threatening infection of the heart and its valves), and an increased risk of catching blood-borne viral infections such as hepatitis C and HIV**
- **Hyperthermia (overheating)**
- **Respiratory collapse**
- **Overdose**



Risks from using heavier doses on a long term basis include:

- **Sinus problems including a blocked/runny nose, nosebleeds and damage to the nasal septum (if the drug is snorted). Some people can also lose their sense of smell**
- **Dependence (addiction)**
- **Serious lung conditions (e.g. pulmonary oedema and bronchitis)**
- **Long term damage to the heart by clogging its major arteries (this can lead to problems such as heart attacks). It's not possible to predict who will be affected by this problem, as it can also affect occasional users**
- **Kidney failure**
- **Increased risk of strokes and seizures**

Psychological health and social risks include:

- **Anxiety, irritability, aggression, paranoia**
- **Low mood, lethargy and irritability during the 'comedown' phase**
- **Increased chances of taking risks with sex, such as not using a condom, and ending up with a sexually transmitted infection (STI) or unintended pregnancy. (People who use cocaine over a period of time may also experience impaired sexual performance.)**

Cocaine is a very unpredictable drug. Toxic (and sometimes fatal) reactions can occur regardless of the amount used, whether the person is a first-time, occasional or regular user.¹³

Mixing drugs causes additional problems. For example, people sometimes use alcohol and cocaine together.¹⁴ However, it's dangerous to do so. Use of both substances at the same time creates a metabolite called cocaethylene, which is more toxic than either substance alone and can cause potentially fatal neurovascular and cardiovascular problems.^{13, 15}

COCAINE PSYCHOSIS

Similar to other stimulants, such as methamphetamine, cocaine can cause a short-lived psychotic reaction in some people. These problems normally go away within a few days or weeks after the person stops using.¹⁶

Cocaine psychosis symptoms include:¹⁷⁻¹⁹

- **Unusual thoughts (the person may believe that other people or forces are reading his/her mind or putting thoughts into his/her head that are not his/her own)**
- **The person may feel that he/she has special powers**
- **Paranoia (feeling extremely suspicious and frightened)**
- **Hallucinations (the person may see or hear things that aren't there, or feeling as though someone is touching him/her when there's nobody there)**

For some people, the symptoms can be more serious and can last for more than a few days — these people are more likely to need treatment in a hospital. If the symptoms last more than a few days, this could also indicate that the person has a long-term psychotic illness such as schizophrenia.

COCAINE DEPENDENCE (ADDICTION)

It is possible to become dependent on (addicted to) cocaine, particularly if the person uses a lot or regularly.¹⁹ People who are dependent on cocaine develop a tolerance to the drug. This means that they need to take more of the drug to get the same effect.¹⁹ People who are dependent on cocaine find that using the drug becomes far more important than other things in their lives, such as work, sport, socialising or study. They crave the drug and find it very difficult to stop using it.

COCAINE WITHDRAWALS

Withdrawals from cocaine usually start around 6–12 hours after last use. There are three phases:^{19, 20}

1. Crash: feelings of fatigue, flat or low mood, increased sleep and reduced cravings.
2. Withdrawal: energy levels and mood are extremely changeable, cravings, disturbed sleep, bad dreams, trouble concentrating, agitation, trouble moving and loss of appetite. Anxiety is common. These symptoms can last several weeks.
3. Extinction: persistence of withdrawal features, gradually subsiding. This can take several months.

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FOR MORE INFORMATION

If you would like more information, please see the National Drugs Campaign website

www.drugs.health.gov.au

We have listed some of the national telephone helplines and websites below.

For free and confidential advice about alcohol and other drugs, call the

National Alcohol and Other Drug Hotline

1800 250 015

It will automatically direct you to the Alcohol and Drug Information Service in your state or territory.

These local alcohol and other drug telephone services offer support, information, counselling and referral to services.

Australian Drug Foundation

Provides information about drugs and links to services in each state and territory

www.adf.org.au

DrugInfo Line

Provides information about drugs and alcohol. Open 9am-5pm, Monday to Friday

1300 85 85 84 or **03 8672 5983**. Or visit www.druginfo.adf.org.au

Just Ask Us

Provides information about drugs, alcohol, health and well-being

www.justaskus.org.au

Kids Helpline

Free, private and confidential telephone and online counselling service for young people aged 5-25 years Open 24 Hours **1800 55 1800**

Lifeline

24 hour crisis line **131114**

Also available is one-on-one chatlines for crisis support, visit

www.lifeline.org.au/Find-Help/Online-Services/crisis-chat

Counselling Online

Free, confidential counselling service for people using drugs, their families and friends

www.counsellingonline.org.au

National Drugs Campaign

Australian Government website provides information about illicit drugs and campaign resources.

www.australia.gov.au/drugs

Family Drug Support

For families and friends of people who use drugs or alcohol

1300 368 186

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