

Drug Facts: **COCAINE**

A Library and Resource Center on Alcohol, Tobacco, Other Drugs, Mental Health and Wellness



Cocaine is a powerfully addictive drug of abuse. Individuals who have tried cocaine have described the experience as a powerful high that gave them a feeling of supremacy. However, once someone starts taking cocaine, one cannot predict or control the extent to which he or she will continue to use the drug. The major ways of taking cocaine are sniffing or snorting, injecting, and smoking (including free-base and crack cocaine).

Health risks exist regardless of whether cocaine is inhaled (snorted), injected, or smoked. However, it appears that compulsive cocaine use may develop even more rapidly if the substance is smoked rather than snorted. Smoking allows extremely high doses of cocaine to reach the brain very quickly and results in an intense and immediate high. The injecting drug user is also at risk for acquiring or transmitting HIV/AIDS if needles or other injection equipment are shared.

HEALTH HAZARDS

Physical effects. Physical effects of cocaine use include constricted peripheral blood vessels, dilated pupils, and increased body temperature, heart rate, and blood pressure. Some cocaine users report feelings of restlessness, irritability, and anxiety, both while using and between periods of use. An appreciable tolerance to the high may be developed, and many addicts report that they seek but fail to achieve as much pleasure as they did from their first exposure.

Paranoia and aggression. High doses of cocaine and/or prolonged use can trigger paranoia. Smoking crack cocaine can produce particularly aggressive paranoid behavior in users. When addicted individuals stop using cocaine, they may become depressed. This depression causes users to continue to use the drug to alleviate their depression.

Long-term effects. Prolonged cocaine snorting can result in ulceration of the mucous membrane of the nose and can damage the nasal septum enough to cause it to collapse. Cocaine-related deaths are often a result of cardiac arrest or seizures followed by respiratory arrest.

Added Danger. When people mix cocaine and alcohol, they are compounding the danger each drug poses and unknowingly causing a complex chemical interaction within their bodies. Researchers have found that the human liver combines cocaine and alcohol to manufacture a third substance, cocaethylene, which intensifies cocaine's euphoric effects and possibly increases the risk of sudden death.