

## Cocaine

Probably one of the most notorious drugs in recent times has been cocaine, perhaps because of the number of celebrities who have used it, its prevalence among affluent populations, and the anecdotes about its addictive properties. But cocaine is hardly a new drug. It has been used and abused for centuries.

Cocaine is a stimulant, derived from the leaves of the coca plant. The juice from the plant is boiled down and then dehydrated, leaving the familiar white powder. The powder form is often mixed (or cut) with a neutral product before being sold. Cocaine is sold in a powder form and in a crystalline form called crack. The powder is typically inhaled (snorted) and the crystal is typically smoked. Both the powder and the crystal forms of cocaine can be injected using a syringe.

Cocaine is a powerful central nervous system stimulant, often giving the user an initial feeling of euphoria. This feeling is typically followed by a feeling of depression. Cocaine use can also cause people to become violent or to act erratically or paranoid. People using cocaine may experience hallucinations, confusion, anxiety, and a loss of interest in basic needs, such as food or sex. Cocaine interferes with the absorption of dopamine, a chemical messenger associated with pleasure and movement.

Cocaine is one of the most addictive drugs in common use. Many addicts report being “hooked” after their first time. Physically, cocaine causes increased body temperature, blood pressure, and heart rate. In fact, the heart may begin to race until it fails, causing sudden death. Strokes, heart attacks, and respiratory failure also are common reactions. Snorting damages the linings of the nose and upper respiratory tract. A red, runny nose or frequent nose bleeds are an indication of cocaine use.

Other warning signs include loss of interest in family, work, or friends; a need for large amounts of money; a decline in performance on the job or in the classroom; anxiety; and depression.

Cocaine use during pregnancy can lead to the death of the unborn child or miscarriage; babies can be born addicted to cocaine that passes from their mothers’ system to theirs. Along with having to go through withdrawal, these babies often experience developmental disabilities.