

# What is cocaine?

Cocaine (coke) is a drug that stimulates the central nervous system – your brain. It is made from the leaves of the coca plant and comes in two forms. As a powder, it is snorted or may be dissolved in water and injected although this is dangerous and not common practice. In a crystal or ‘rock’ form, it is known as freebase or crack cocaine and is smoked.

## Effects

### During use

The effects felt during use can be both desired and undesired. For most people who use cocaine, the desired effects are feelings of excitement and confidence. Undesired effects can include feeling aggressive or upset. People react to cocaine in different ways. In some people, even small amounts of cocaine can cause problems, but harmful effects are most likely when large amounts of cocaine are used.

### Harmful effects

Harmful effects can be fatal, usually due to stress on the heart and increased body temperature. These include:

- > bleeding into the brain
- > tightening of arteries (affecting the heart)
- > high blood pressure
- > unpredictable behaviour.

### Overdose - what to look out for

Someone has experienced an overdose if they suffer a medical emergency as a result of accidentally or intentionally using a larger amount of a drug than normal. Noticeable signs you are or someone else is having an overdose can include:

- > headaches
- > feeling dizzy
- > breathing problems
- > extreme agitation
- > seizures / convulsions
- > heart pain - possibly heart attack
- > high temperature
- > sudden stomach pain
- > restlessness and trouble concentrating.

If someone is experiencing any of the above signs, phone 000 immediately for emergency medical attention. Police will not attend unless the ambulance officers call for help or a death occurs.

### Effects of long-term use

Cocaine use can cause ongoing effects when using long term, even between episodes of use. These include:

- > nosebleeds
- > sinus problems
- > damage to the inside of the nose
- > paranoid and suspicious thinking, which can lead to aggression
- > psychotic reactions (hearing voices, imagining things, hallucinations and delusions).

Smoking crack cocaine has specific long-term effects. It can cause:

- > breathing difficulties
- > long-term cough
- > chest pain and lung damage.

### Duration of effects during use

The method used to take cocaine determines how quickly the effects are felt. When snorted, injected or smoked, effects begin within a minute and last between one and three hours.

## Dependence

Using cocaine daily, or almost every day, over a period of time, leads to physical and psychological changes in the body.

The body adapts or ‘gets used to’ having the drug on a regular basis. This is called tolerance. People who are tolerant need more of the drug to achieve the same effects, but increasing the dose also increases the likelihood of unpleasant effects.

The key sign of dependence is difficulties controlling use, despite the negative consequences. People who are dependent spend a lot of time thinking about drugs, obtaining and using drugs, and recovering from the effects. People who are dependent find it difficult to reduce or stop drug use, even when they are aware of problems related to their drug use.



## Withdrawal

Withdrawal occurs when someone who is dependent on cocaine stops using it or tries to cut down. Short-term symptoms can include:

- > cravings
- > feeling sick and/or vomiting
- > shaking
- > feeling angry and upset
- > intense hunger
- > feeling tired and/or weak
- > muscle pain
- > disturbed or restless sleep
- > depression and suicidal thoughts.

## Reducing the risk

While avoiding cocaine use is the safest option, there are ways to reduce harm.

- > Using smaller amounts less often reduces the risk of developing dependence. Avoid regular use.
- > Avoid mixing with other drugs.
- > Don't use alone.
- > Cocaine acts as a local anaesthetic so is very dangerous to inject with risk of local injury and infection at the injecting site. There is also the risk of infections and blood borne virus transmission such as hepatitis C, hepatitis B and HIV.
- > There is also a blood borne virus risk from sharing of snorting equipment.
- > If injecting, always use clean injecting equipment and dispose of all equipment safely. There are Clean Needle Programs throughout South Australia where sterile injecting equipment, health information and referrals can be accessed for free.
- > Visit [www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/dassa](http://www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/dassa) for more information.

## Cocaine and the law

It is illegal to make, keep, use, sell or give away cocaine.

Under the section 47 of the *Road Traffic Act 1961*, it is an offence to drive or attempt to drive a motor vehicle under the influence of a drug. Drugs in your system make driving extremely dangerous because they impair coordination, reduce reaction time, and affect your vision and ability to judge distance and speed.

For more information about cocaine and the law, visit the SA Health website [www.sahealth.sa.gov.au](http://www.sahealth.sa.gov.au) > Health topics > Legal matters > Scroll to: Illicit drug laws.

## Further information

Risks of using drugs - visit [www.sahealth.sa.gov.au](http://www.sahealth.sa.gov.au) > Healthy Living > Is your health at risk? > Scroll to: The risks of using drugs.

Phone the Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS) on 1300 13 1340 between 8.30am and 10pm for confidential telephone counselling, information and referral.

[www.knowyouroptions.sa.gov.au](http://www.knowyouroptions.sa.gov.au) provides information on available drug and alcohol support services by location.

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## For more information

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**Phone: 1300 13 1340**

**Confidential telephone counselling and information available between 8.30am and 10pm every day.**

[www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/dassa](http://www.sahealth.sa.gov.au/dassa)

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