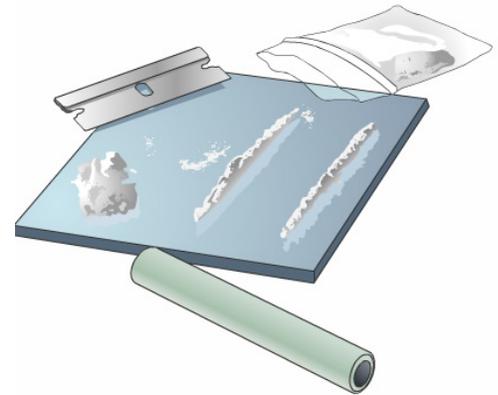


Introduction

Cocaine is a powerful drug that stimulates the brain. People who use it can form a strong addiction. Addiction is when a drug user can't stop taking a drug, even when he or she wants to.

Cocaine may be taken in different ways. No matter how it is taken, cocaine is dangerous. It can cause heart attacks, respiratory failure and strokes. Any of these can be fatal.



This reference summary explains cocaine. It talks about cocaine abuse, cocaine's effects on the brain and health complications. It also covers recovery and treatment of cocaine abuse.

Cocaine Abuse and Addiction

Drug abuse is when a person takes an illegal drug or takes medicine for reasons other than illness. People may start abusing drugs for many reasons.

There are certain drugs that are more commonly abused. These drugs may be:

- Illegal in some areas of the world, such as heroin.
- Legal for adults only in some areas of the world, such as alcohol and tobacco.
- Prescription and over-the-counter medicines, such as painkillers or cough and cold medicines.

Like heroin, cocaine is a drug that is illegal in some areas of the world. Cocaine is a commonly abused drug.



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Cocaine is a white powder. It can be taken in many different ways, including:

- In a vein.
- In the nose.
- Smoked.

Cocaine abuse often begins in social situations. People may try cocaine because the people they are with or around are taking it. Cocaine addiction happens when a drug user feels that they need cocaine and can't stop taking it, even if they want to. The urge to take cocaine is too strong to control, even if you know it is harming you.



For people with a cocaine addiction, the addiction is the most important thing in their life. A person with a cocaine addiction might do just about anything to support their addiction. For example, a person with a cocaine addiction may steal money in order to buy more cocaine. When people start taking cocaine, they don't plan to get addicted. A drug user believes they can control how much and how often they take a drug.

Addiction happens because drugs change the brain and how it works. These brain changes may last a long time and can cause:

- Memory loss.
- Mood swings.
- Trouble thinking and making decisions.

It is important to understand that addiction is a disease, just like diabetes and cancer are diseases. Addiction is not simply a weakness. It can affect people of all ages and backgrounds. It is also important to know that drug addiction is different than drug dependence.



Drug dependence is when someone becomes physically dependent on a drug. Without the drug they will become sick. Drug addiction is a mental disease that can lead to physical drug dependence. Not all drugs that can lead to addiction cause dependence. For instance, someone may be addicted to alcohol but not need it physically. Likewise, not all drug dependencies come from addiction. A person may be on a prescribed medication that they cannot stop taking abruptly without getting sick.

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Effects

Cocaine changes how the brain works. It affects the levels of dopamine in the brain. Dopamine is a chemical. It is associated with pleasure and movement. Some brain cells, or neurons, use dopamine to communicate with one another. Dopamine is released by a neuron in response to a pleasure signal, such as when a person smells good food.

Normally, the dopamine goes back into the cell that released it. This shuts off the communication with other neurons. But cocaine stops the dopamine from returning to the cell. Dopamine then builds up in the brain.

The extra dopamine causes the effects of cocaine. This includes a “high” feeling. A person using the drug may be happy and excited. He or she may also feel more alert and have more energy. But the person’s mood can change quickly. Cocaine can also cause a person to be angry, nervous and afraid. Cocaine also causes a person’s heart to beat fast and the body to feel hot, shake and twitch. It can also interfere with normal sleeping and eating habits.

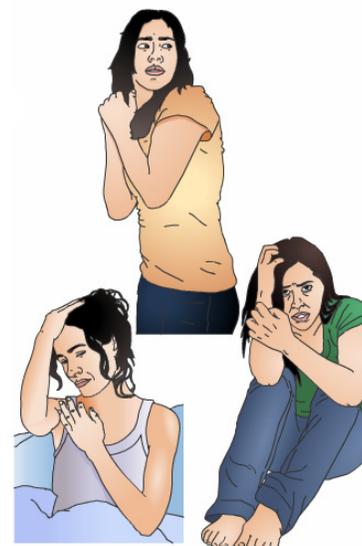


The “high” is usually followed by a “crash.” This causes a person using cocaine to feel very tired and sad. The crash may last for many days. It also can cause the drug user to have a strong craving for the drug. A cocaine high usually does not last very long. A person may keep taking the drug again and again to try to keep feeling good. This leads to addiction. People addicted to cocaine might take bigger doses or take it more often to get high.

When a person addicted to cocaine tries to quit taking the drug, it can cause them to:

- Act nervous and restless.
- Be suspicious of people and things around them.
- Feel very sad and tired.
- Have bad dreams.
- Strongly crave the drug.

This makes it even more difficult to quit taking cocaine.



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Health Complications

Cocaine abuse and addiction can cause many health complications. The complications are often serious. Cocaine can make a person feel sick, causing stomach pain and headaches. It can make a person shake, vomit or pass out. Cocaine also affects a person's normal eating patterns. It can make a person not want to eat. Over time, this can lead to weight loss and malnutrition. Malnutrition is when the body does not get the nutrients it needs to be healthy.

Another health complication of cocaine abuse is heart problems. Cocaine raises the blood pressure and makes the heart beat faster. This can cause a heart attack or a stroke, and either can lead to sudden death. This can happen even if the person has not been using cocaine for very long.

Some health complications depend on how the cocaine is taken. If it is snorted through the nose, cocaine can cause a runny nose and nosebleeds. It can also cause the drug user to lose his or her sense of smell.

If cocaine is injected, it can leave marks where the needle went in. Sharing needles can also cause more serious complications, such as HIV/AIDS or hepatitis.

HIV stands for human immunodeficiency virus. It kills or damages the body's immune system cells. AIDS stands for acquired immunodeficiency syndrome. It is the most advanced stage of infection with HIV. HIV/AIDS can be spread by sharing drug needles. HIV/AIDS can also be spread through unprotected sex. People who are high on cocaine may forget to use condoms.

Hepatitis is an inflammation of the liver. It can lead to scarring, called cirrhosis, or to cancer. Hepatitis is also spread by sharing drug needles and through unprotected sex.

People who abuse cocaine may experience a temporary period of paranoid psychosis. This can cause a person to lose touch with reality. They can also experience hallucinations. Hallucinations refer to something a person senses as being real but is, in fact, not real. This may include a sight, sound, smell, taste or touch.



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Recovery & Treatment

Treatment helps people stop using cocaine. Treatment often includes talk therapy.

The goals of treatment are to help a person:

- Learn how to fight the urges to use drugs again.
- Regain control of his or her life.

When someone quits taking cocaine and starts learning how to live life without the drug, it is called “recovery.” The first step in recovery is detoxification.

Cocaine abuse changes the way the brain works and creates a need for the cocaine. It will take a while for your body to adjust to life without it. Detoxification, or withdrawal therapy, helps you stop taking cocaine in a safe way. It may involve slowly reducing how much of the drug you use.

Side effects of withdrawal may include:

- Anxiety.
- Depression.
- Extreme tiredness.
- Problems sleeping.
- Strong cravings for the drug.

Withdrawal may also cause more serious side effects, such as:

- High blood pressure or heart rate.
- Rapid breathing.
- Seeing or hearing things that are not real.
- Seizures.
- Suicidal thoughts.



Because withdrawal can cause serious side effects, it may require monitoring in a medical facility or treatment center. Treatment programs that provide education and therapy sessions are available. These sessions may be done individually, in a group setting or with family members. Treatment can also be done in different settings. Outpatient programs let people come and go to receive treatment. Inpatient programs let people stay as residents in a facility to receive treatment.

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Counseling can be done one-on-one or with family members. It can help you cope with cravings and provide strategies for avoiding relapse. Relapsing is when a person quits a drug but starts using again. People recovering from addiction often have one or more relapses along the way.



Self-help groups are also a key part of treatment for many people. These groups focus on how drug addiction is a disease that requires ongoing treatment. It can also connect you to people who are in similar situations.

A health care provider or counselor can help determine which type of treatment is best for each person. Concerned family members can also get in contact with a health care provider or counselor to try to help a loved one that is addicted to drugs.

Summary

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