

Cocaine: Your Child and Drugs



Cocaine use in the United States

Cocaine use by teens is a major problem and concern in America today. Many young people think that drugs are not all that harmful and that using cocaine is a symbol of status and success. They also think that trying cocaine is a step toward becoming an adult. The American Academy of Pediatrics has developed this information to help you learn about the dangers of cocaine use.

What is cocaine?

Cocaine is made from the leaves of the South American cocoa bush. The leaves are soaked in chemicals until they break down into cocaine crystals. These crystals are dried and crushed into a bitter, white powder.

How is cocaine used?

As a powder, cocaine is usually inhaled, or “snorted,” through the nose. A less common method is to inject it directly into a vein. Cocaine can also be smoked in a pipe after it is hardened into a paste. This is called “free-basing.”

Cocaine is also sold in a nugget form for as little as \$5 to \$15. This type of cocaine, called “crack,” is also smoked. Users can make their own crack from a mixture of cocaine powder, baking soda, and water. Crack cocaine is much more powerful than cocaine in powder form.

The “high” from smoking crack cocaine is more intense and habit-forming than from snorting cocaine powder.

What are the effects of cocaine?

While most people know the effects of alcohol and marijuana, very few know the facts about cocaine. Cocaine is a powerful stimulant. It affects the nervous system and causes a user's heart rate and blood pressure to increase very quickly. Cocaine triggers pleasure centers in the brain and makes the user feel instantly alert. It also creates a false sense of joy (a “high”). But this “high” is short-lived—from 5 to 30 minutes, depending on how the drug is taken. As the drug's effects wear off, users may feel anxious, depressed, and tired. Marijuana, alcohol, sleeping pills, or “uppers” are sometimes used to ease cocaine's effects.

Is cocaine addictive?

The cocaine “high” tempts users to want more of the drug once its effects start to wear off. The more a person uses cocaine, the greater the desire to keep using it. The amount of cocaine needed to get high depends on how it is used, how long the person has been using it, and the strength (potency) of the drug. Cocaine is highly addictive. In laboratory tests, monkeys have starved or died because they chose cocaine instead of food and water. Smoking cocaine or crack increases the risk of addiction. When a person smokes cocaine, the lungs transfer the drug quickly into the bloodstream and it goes straight to the brain.

What are the dangers of cocaine?

Cocaine causes the user's heart rate and blood pressure to increase. The more cocaine used, the more intense this becomes. For some people, even small amounts of cocaine can cause dangerous increases in heart rate and abnormal heart rhythms. When this happens, the heart may not be able to pump enough blood to the brain, and a cocaine user can die.

In young people, cocaine can cause:

- Emotional problems
- School problems
- Low motivation
- Isolation from friends or family
- Family conflicts

Some cocaine users even turn to stealing or prostitution to support this costly drug habit. Pregnant women who use cocaine may have miscarriages, or their babies may be born with severe birth defects.

Stages of drug use

There are several stages of drug use. Be aware of any changes in your child's behavior that may indicate a problem with drugs.

Experimenting with drugs. In this stage, a person tries a drug such as cocaine in search of “fun.” There is often strong peer pressure to enter this stage. Assuming there are no initial physical problems, there is usually no change in behavior, except for secret activities meant to hide the cocaine use.

Actively seeking drugs. In this stage, a person needs more cocaine to get the same feelings. This is called tolerance and is a sign of addiction. A person may use cocaine daily to get “high” and escape reality. Behavior begins to change and schoolwork may slip. Problems at home and school may lead the person to use more cocaine. Because cocaine is highly addictive, occasional users can quickly become frequent users.

Preoccupation with drugs. In this stage, there is a significant loss of control over drug use, and the user may become angry or isolated without cocaine. Heavy drug use is costly, and a user may lie and steal from family or friends to pay for cocaine. This may lead to trouble with the law.

Whether or not someone becomes a heavy user often depends on the reasons for trying cocaine in the first place. Recognizing the signs of abuse and getting help from family members, pediatricians, teachers, youth groups, or clergy are the first steps in helping your child recover from drug abuse or addiction.

How to help your child resist drugs

Sooner or later most youngsters will find themselves in a situation in which they must decide whether or not to take drugs. Follow these guidelines to help your child learn to resist this pressure:

- Build your child's self-esteem with plenty of praise and love.
- Avoid being overly critical when your child makes mistakes.
- Talk openly with your child about important topics like drugs and drug use.
- Help your child deal with peer pressure, strong emotions, and feelings.
- Encourage your child to get involved in hobbies, school clubs, and other activities.
- Spend leisure time with your child.

Remember, parents who use and abuse drugs place their children at higher risk for drug abuse. Make sure you set a good example at home by:

- Limiting your use of alcohol
- Not smoking cigarettes
- Using over-the-counter drugs sparingly and only according to directions on the label or from your physician

Despite your best efforts, your teen may still use or abuse drugs. Some warning signs of drug abuse include:

- Changes in choice of friends
- Changes in dress and appearance
- Frequent arguments and unexplained violent actions
- Changes in sleeping or eating habits
- Skipping school
- Falling grades
- Runaway and delinquent behavior
- Legal problems
- Suicide attempts

Positive, honest communication between you and your child is one of the best ways to help prevent drug use. If talking to your teen becomes a problem, your pediatrician may be able to help open the lines of communication. If you suspect your child is using cocaine or any other drug, talk to your pediatrician about how you can help.

The information contained in this publication should not be used as a substitute for the medical care and advice of your pediatrician. There may be variations in treatment that your pediatrician may recommend based on individual facts and circumstances.

From your doctor

