

# COCAINE/CRACK

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## What is cocaine?

Cocaine is a natural stimulant (upper) that temporarily increases energy. It is extracted from the coca plant and prepared into a white, crystal like powder that is commonly referred to as blow, coke, or snow. When heated, this powder can be cooked into a rock formation, known as crack. Chemically, there is no difference between powder and crack cocaine; both can produce a short-lived, intense high when used, but the method of use will vary.

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## What are the symptoms of cocaine use?

Individuals who use cocaine may experience the following side effects:

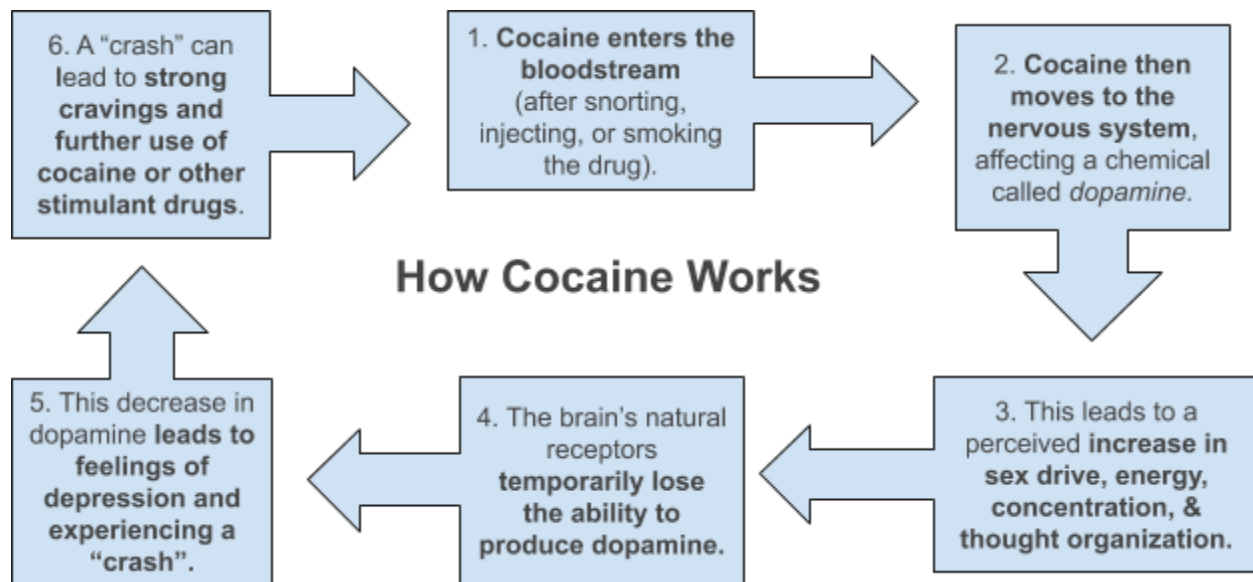
- Increased heart rate
- Increased blood pressure
- Reduced desire to sleep
- Paranoia
- Decreased appetite
- Dry mouth and increased thirst
- Warm skin
- Agitation
- Runny nose, sniffing

Depending on the method of use, cocaine can also cause numbness of the throat, tongue, mouth, or skin.

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## How does cocaine work?

Cocaine is a stimulant (upper) that affects the central nervous system. Look at the chart to learn more about how cocaine works once it enters the body:



The more cocaine someone uses, the greater his or her tolerance to the drug becomes. The more tolerance a person has, the more cocaine he or she will need to feel high. This can lead to regular cocaine use and addiction, which can have the following side effects:

- Anxiety
  - Depression
  - Nausea
  - Agitation
  - Insomnia
  - Weight loss
  - Loss of sex drive
  - Compulsive behavior
  - Psychological dependency
  - Paranoia
  - Intense social withdrawal
  - Worsened pre-existing mental conditions
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## What does a “crash” feel like?

Using cocaine affects a chemical called dopamine by increasing sex drive, energy, concentration, and thought organization. When this happens, the brain’s natural receptors temporarily lose their ability to produce dopamine naturally, leading to a “crash” or extreme loss of energy. This can feel very unpleasant, both physically and psychologically.

Crashing can include the following symptoms:

- Physical exhaustion
- Cold-like symptoms
- Depression
- Anxiety
- Paranoia
- Feeling restless and sweaty
- Sensitivity to noise and light
- Strong craving for more cocaine

To ease the effects of a crash, it is important to get plenty of rest, stay hydrated, and avoid skipping meals.

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## Cocaine overdoses

Cocaine can lead to overdose, even after only one use. It is also possible for someone to experience a heart attack or stroke. Call 911 if you witness someone who has used cocaine experiencing any of the following signs or symptoms:

- Fast heart rate or no pulse
- Shortness of breath
- Raised body temperature
- Sweating
- Chest pain
- Inability to speak or walk
- Vomiting
- Seizure

### **Opioid Overdose Reversal:**

Cocaine is not an opioid, however it is possible that someone who uses cocaine may also have [opioids](#) in their system. This may be the case if someone engages in speedballing (intentionally mixing cocaine with heroin) or if the cocaine product was unknowingly laced with other chemicals, such as [fentanyl](#). To learn how to reverse an opioid related overdose by using naloxone, visit this [page](#).

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## **Safer use strategies for cocaine**

Cocaine can be used in different ways. Each method has its own risks that can lead to serious health conditions, including HIV, hepatitis, TB and/or herpes. Look at the different methods below to learn more about risks involved and potential harm reduction tips. When using cocaine, it is important to stay hydrated, use a little bit at a time, and avoid mixing with other drugs or alcohol.

- **Smoking Crack:** Takes a few seconds to feel effect.

Crack is the smokable form of powder cocaine. Using a crack pipe and lighter, the substance is heated, then inhaled. Smoking can lead to a number of serious conditions, including lung and throat damage, stroke, abnormal heart beat, and extremely high blood pressure. Because smoking involves heat and glass, there is also a risk of accidentally burning or cutting lips. This can increase the risk of HIV and/or hepatitis.

### **Reduction tips:**

- Make sure the pipe is clean before use.
  - Cover the mouthpiece of the stem with tape or rubber to prevent heat burns and cuts.
  - Never share paraphernalia.
  - Drink plenty of water to stay hydrated.
  - Use lip balm before/after use to keep skin hydrated.
- **Snorting:** Takes about 3 minutes to feel effect.  
Powder cocaine can be snorted through the use of a straw. Snorting can lead to nasal damage, and after repeated use, may

cause a hole through the septum (the division between the nostrils).

**Reduction tips:**

- Make sure the surface where the cocaine is being used (such as a table or countertop) is clean.
  - Avoid using dollar bills as a snorting tool. Money may contain different bacteria that can lead to illness.
  - Never share or reuse the same snorting tool. Use something disposable, such as a clean straw or rolled up paper, and be sure to throw it out immediately after use.
  - After snorting, rinse the nose with warm water. A few drops of warm water will help flush or dissolve remaining powder.
- **Injecting:** Takes about 30 seconds to feel effect.  
Powder cocaine can be injected into the bloodstream by using a needle and syringe. Sharing devices or using items that may not be sterile increases the risk of getting HIV and other bloodborne illnesses. Injecting in the same area on the body can lead to vein, nerve, or cartilage damage.

**Reduction tips:**

- Clean the injection site with an alcohol pad before fixing. Use a new, sharp, sterile syringe for each injection. To find out where to access clean syringes, click [here](#).
  - Never share paraphernalia.
  - Rotate injection sites to avoid infection.
  - Be patient and do not rush the injection.
  - Do a “test shot” to help determine the strength of the cocaine.
  - To learn more about safer injection practices, take a look at [this manual](#).
- **Speedballing:**  
When a person mixes cocaine with heroin and injects the combination, it is referred to as “speedballing”. A person might engage in speedballing to experience an intense, fast high

produced by both drugs. Speedballing is very dangerous. Because cocaine is a stimulant (upper) and heroin is a depressant (downer), combining the two substances sends opposite messages to the body. This can dramatically increase a person's risk for both heart attack and overdose.

Reduction tips:

- Avoid mixing drugs.
- Reduce the amount of each drug being used.
- Never use alone.

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## Where can I learn more?

For questions or more information, visit [resource page](#) or e-mail us at [overdose.prevention@phila.gov](mailto:overdose.prevention@phila.gov).

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## Sources:

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[http://www.drugpolicy.org/sites/default/files/cocainefacts\\_august\\_2018\\_1.pdf](http://www.drugpolicy.org/sites/default/files/cocainefacts_august_2018_1.pdf)

Harm Reduction Coalition, *Straight Dope Education Series: C is for Cocaine*:  
<https://harmreduction.org/drugs-and-drug-users/drug-tools/c-is-for-cocaine/>