

PHENCYCLIDINE (PCP)

What is Phencyclidine (PCP)?

Phencyclidine, or PCP, is a mind-altering drug that can lead to hallucinations. In its purest form, PCP is a white powder that can be dissolved in water and has a bitter chemical taste. It is a synthetic drug that can be prepared in pill, capsule, liquid, or powder form. It is most common for people to smoke PCP, however it can also be swallowed, snorted, or injected. Common street names for PCP include angel dust, rocket fuel, and embalming fluid.

What are the symptoms of PCP?

The experiences felt while using PCP vary from person to person. Individuals often refer to their experiences as a “trip,” and may call an unpleasant experience a “bad trip”. Feelings can range from extreme happiness, or euphoria, to psychotic episodes which may resemble the *symptoms* of schizophrenia (delusions, paranoia, disordered thinking). When using PCP, a person’s ability to tell the difference between fantasy and reality becomes distorted. This person may also feel detached from his or her body, which is commonly described as an “out of body experience”.

Experiencing a “bad trip” can feel very unpleasant or disturbing. The person may feel physically unwell (nauseous or vomiting) and may experience severe anxiety, paranoia, and compulsive behavior. This person may believe he or she has increased strength and cannot be harmed. Because PCP is an anaesthetic (numbing substance), the person may also have no perception of pain. This false sense of awareness and lack of fear can lead to serious injury or death. PCP use can also lead to loss of consciousness, seizures, or coma.

The immediate effects of PCP typically last for 4-6 hours and vary depending on the dosage used. Low to moderate doses may result in the following side effects:

- Profuse sweating
- Flushing (rapid warmth and increased redness in skin tone)
- Increased breathing and heart rate
- Raised blood pressure
- Shallow breathing
- Generalized numbness
- Involuntary eye movement (fast blinking, blank stare)
- Strange posture

At higher doses, a person may experience the following:

- Lower blood pressure, heart rate, and breathing
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Blurred vision
- Drooling
- Loss of balance or coordination
- Dizziness
- Slurred speech
- Disorientation

Using PCP can also lead to dependency or addiction. When a person is dependent on PCP, he or she can experience cravings or withdrawal symptoms that are both physically and psychologically unpleasant. Long term side effects of PCP use include memory loss, weight loss, and depression.

PCP overdoses

PCP use can have dangerous effects on a person's body due to its sedative (downer) effects. Many individuals who use PCP are brought to emergency rooms because of the drug's unpleasant mental effects. High amounts of PCP in a person's system can lead to overdose, which can be deadly.

Additionally, using PCP in combination with alcohol or benzodiazepines (Valium-like substances) can increase the risk of overdose significantly. It is best to avoid mixing drugs.

If you suspect that someone is experiencing an overdose, call 911 immediately.

Symptoms of PCP overdose include:

- Extreme agitation
- Dehydration
- Severe overheating
- Paranoia and psychosis
- Irregular heartbeat
- Coma

All of these symptoms are severe. If you recognize them in someone using PCP, call 911 immediately.

Safer use strategies for PCP

PCP is most commonly used by smoking. The powder is applied to a leafy substance (such as mint leaves, marijuana, or tobacco), and then smoked. Additional ways that PCP can be used include snorting (powder form), swallowing (tablet/capsule), or injecting (dissolving powder form in liquid). People who use PCP can take the following precautions to decrease the risk of harm or overdose:

- Use in a positive, safe place with someone you trust. Have a trusted friend act as a “sitter” to monitor you while you are high. If possible, this person should not be intoxicated while monitoring.
- Use a small amount of PCP at a time to help make the experience more manageable.
- Avoid using PCP in combination with other street drugs.
- Do not use PCP with alcohol or benzodiazepines (Valium-like substances).

Strange behavior and violence while using PCP

As a mind-altering substance, PCP affects the way people perceive themselves, their environments, and other people. When using PCP, a person may think that he or she has increased strength and that it is impossible to be harmed by dangerous situations. The person's ability to think rationally disappears, which can lead to strange and violent behavior. This can become very dangerous for the person using the drug, as well as other people who may be near.

If someone who has used PCP is **severely paranoid, agitated, or acting strangely**, use the following strategies to help keep the person safe. Before getting involved, however, it is important to assess the situation and keep your own safety in mind as well:

- Bring the person to a safe, calm setting that is not crowded
 - Remind the person that these feelings are due to a drug they used and that it should wear off
 - If the person is experiencing an overdose, call 911 immediately
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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.

Sources

Drugs.com - Facts about PCP <https://www.drugs.com/illicit/pcp.html>

Johnson, M.W., Richards, W.A., and Griffiths, R.R. (2011). Human hallucinogen research: Guidelines for safety. *J Psychopharmacol*, 22(6): 603-620. Doi: 10.1177/0269881108093587

Synthesis and effects of PCP analogs:

<https://www.erowid.org/archive/rhodium/chemistry/pcp/effects.html>

Justice.gov - PCP Fast Facts: <https://www.justice.gov/archive/ndic/pubs4/4440/>