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BASIC FACTS ABOUT DRUGS: Cocaine and Crack

What are Cocaine and Crack?

Cocaine is a central nervous system stimulant, the most powerful found in nature. Most often seen in the form of a white, crystalline powder, it is extracted from the leaves of the coca plant.

What is Crack?

Crack is a smokeable, rapidly reacting form of cocaine base, which is processed from cocaine hydrochloride. It usually appears as off-white chips, rocks, or chunks.



How Are These Drugs Taken?

The primary route of administration for cocaine powder is through inhalation, commonly referred to as "snorting." This is often done in a ritualistic way; e.g., poured onto a mirror, chopped, separated into "lines," and then "snorted" off a small "coke" spoon, or through a straw or rolled-up currency. Some users dissolve the powder in water and inject it into veins, though this is less common than "snorting."

Crack is smoked. This is easier than "snorting" and carries much less social stigma than injection. Chips or chunks are usually placed in a pipe, often made of glass, or a similar vessel and heated with a match or cigarette lighter. The user inhales the fumes.

How Do They Affect You?

Cocaine in all its forms stimulates the central nervous system. It causes the heart to beat more rapidly and blood vessels to constrict. This results in the demand for a greater supply of blood. But the narrowed blood vessels are unable to deliver the volume of blood demanded, which significantly increases the risk of cardiovascular incidents or strokes. Initially, use of these drugs reduces appetite and makes the user feel more alert, energetic, and self-confident—even more powerful.

With high doses, users can become delusional, paranoid, and even suffer acute toxic psychosis. Blood pressure increases, which can cause strokes or heart attacks. In some cases these effects have proven fatal. As the drug's effects wear off, a depression (often called a "crash") can set in, leaving the user feeling fatigued, jumpy, fearful, and anxious.

Crack causes the same effects as powder cocaine. Because it is smoked, however, onset is more rapid and intensity greater. Thus, the effects may be significantly exacerbated. The depression following use is described as considerably deeper and more profound. The likelihood of cocaine psychosis after binging on crack may be greater and notably more intense. Crack use is associated with incidents of hyperactive violence by users and is capable of doing significant harm to fetuses of pregnant users.

Paying the Price of Cocaine and Crack Use

A broad range of consequences include:

- Dependence and addiction
- Cardiovascular problems, including irregular heartbeat, heart attack, and heart failure
- Neurological incidents, including strokes, seizures, fungal brain infections, and hemorrhaging in tissue surrounding the brain
- Pulmonary effects, such as fluid in the lungs, aggravation of asthma and other lung disorders, and respiratory failure
- Psychiatric complications, including psychosis, paranoia, depression, anxiety disorders, and delusions
- Increased risk of traumatic injury from accidents and aggressive, violent, or criminal behavior
- Other effects include: sleeplessness, sexual dysfunction, diminished sense of smell, perforated nasal septum, nausea, and headaches.
- Crack users often singe eyebrows or eyelashes with the flame of matches or lighters. They also burn fingertips and other body parts from contact with superheated vessels (e.g., glass pipes).
- Fetal cocaine effects include premature separation of the placenta, spontaneous abortion, premature labor, low birthweight and head circumference at birth, greater chance of visual impairment, mental retardation, genitourinary malformations, and greater chance of developmental problems.
- For intravenous (IV) cocaine users, there is increased risk of hepatitis, HIV infection, and endocarditis.
- For addicts, whether they smoke, inject, or snort, promiscuous sexual activity can increase the risk of HIV infection.