

Public Health  
Agency

# IT'S NO BIG DEAL?

You may think that coke is a drug where you are in control, that coke gives you confidence or that the come-down is not as bad as with other drugs.

## If that's all there is to it, then what's the big deal?

It's important to be aware of:

- what coke is;
- what it's mixed with;
- what the side effects are;
- what happens when you take it with alcohol;
- what the law says about coke.

Coke is a stimulant drug. This means it speeds up the brain and nervous system. It raises the body temperature, gives you dilated pupils and puts a strain on the heart, making it beat faster.



# JUST PART OF A NIGHT OUT?

Some people who take cocaine say it gives them confidence and is part of a good night out.

However coke can:

- give you an increased feeling of self-importance, which can make you appear arrogant;
- make you talk at or over others to make sure everyone hears what you have to say;
- make you paranoid.

Research shows a strong link between high doses or binges of coke and violent or erratic behaviour.

**“When you’re in the bar, drugs are constantly around you.”**

**Gerard, Belfast**



# WHAT'S THE PAYBACK?

Cocaine is a greedy drug. It uses up the brain's supply of chemicals associated with pleasure so that you can experience a high.

When the high starts to wear off, the brain's supply of pleasure-giving chemicals is low. It's like when you use a credit card – you enjoy your spending spree but then once the bill comes in it's not so much fun.

With coke, the payback can be mental health problems including:

- Depression
- Mood swings
- Restlessness
- Anxiety and panic attacks
- Hallucinations
- Psychosis



# HEART TROUBLE

You might have heard people who have taken coke complain of chest pain. Scientific evidence has shown that taking coke can really harm your heart.

Heart failure can happen to anyone using coke – it doesn't matter how much they are taking or how long they have been using for. If you already have a heart condition (which you might not know about) then you're at even greater risk.

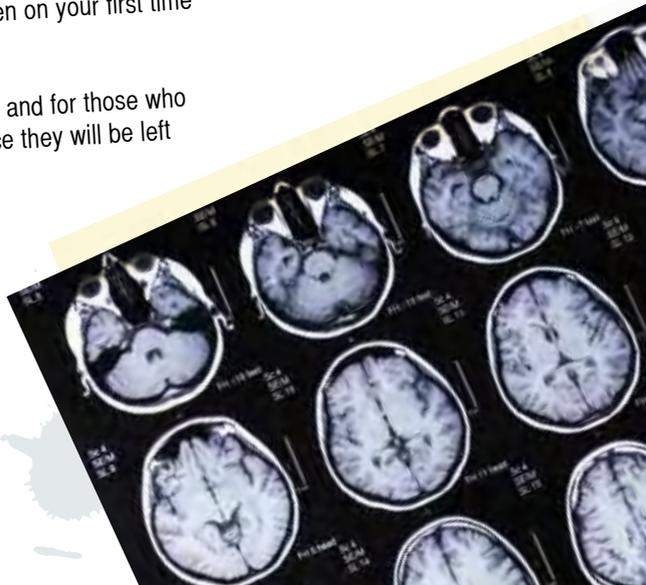
**"You get heart pains, a sharp pain sometimes the next day after taking it."**

**Phil, Portadown**

# BRAIN DAMAGE

It's not just older people or heavy users who are at risk of brain haemorrhage (stroke) when taking coke. Lots of scientific studies have shown the link between taking coke and having a brain haemorrhage. It can happen even if you are young and healthy, have only used small amounts of coke or even on your first time taking it.

This is a common cause of death, and for those who do survive there is a strong chance they will be left disabled in some way.





# MAKING A HABIT OF IT

Maybe you think because you only use coke at weekends and not every day you're in control, but it might not be long before the habit starts to control you.

Users often take more and more to try to achieve the high they experienced when they first tried coke. This rarely works because the body builds up a tolerance. This is a dangerous trap to fall into as a coke habit can seriously harm your health and end up jeopardising your relationships, career and lead to serious debt.

Early signs that you could be getting hooked include:

- you find it harder and harder to turn down coke when it's offered;
- you don't want to mix with people who aren't taking coke;
- you don't want to go out unless there's coke available.

**"It's the sort of thing that makes you want more."**

**Steve, Belfast**

**"I would get as much as I can afford. I always get myself in debt with it. I say 'can I get some on the strap and I'll give you it back next week', and I never can afford it."**

**Claire, Ballymena**

# IS COKE A CLEAN DRUG?

Sniffing coke causes damage in the nasal passages, so straws and banknotes that are used to snort the coke could come into contact with hepatitis C infected blood or mucus. This may then be transmitted to someone else sharing the same straw or banknote.

Hepatitis C is a serious condition which damages the liver and causes it to become inflamed. It's known as a silent killer because often people with the disease have no symptoms until it reaches an advanced stage. Hepatitis C can lead to liver failure which is usually fatal.

Regularly snorting cocaine, can also lead to:

- loss of the sense of smell;
- nosebleeds;
- problems with swallowing;
- hoarseness;
- a chronically runny nose.

In extreme cases snorting coke can cause the nasal septum to break away.





# A DANGEROUS MIX

People often take coke when they are drinking because they think it helps them keep going or sober up.

In fact it is dangerous to mix cocaine and alcohol. When both cocaine and alcohol enter into the bloodstream they form a toxic substance known as cocaethylene, which:

- is more toxic than either drug alone;
- has been linked with damage to the liver;
- can cause fatal heart damage.

Research has shown that mixing cocaine and alcohol can lead to aggressive and violent behaviour.

**“I’m always drinking when I take drugs...that’s the routine.”**

**Kelly, Belfast**

# FULL OF IT

Coke in Northern Ireland is generally less pure than anywhere else in the UK. The coke sold here is likely to be only 30% pure, perhaps even less.

Dealers will usually cut the coke with substances that look similar or mimic its anaesthetic effect. While you may think it is cut with everyday household products, recent police seizures show the most common substances used are:

## **Lidocaine**

A local anaesthetic that numbs the gums and can damage the heart.

## **Benzocaine**

Commonly used as a pain reliever from skin irritations and is used in ear medications for removing excess wax.

## **Phenacetin**

This painkiller is highly restricted because it is thought to cause cancer.

Other substances used to cut cocaine include worming drugs, insecticide ingredients and paracetamol.

**"If you dwell on what coke's mixed  
with you would never use it"**

**Mark, Londonderry**

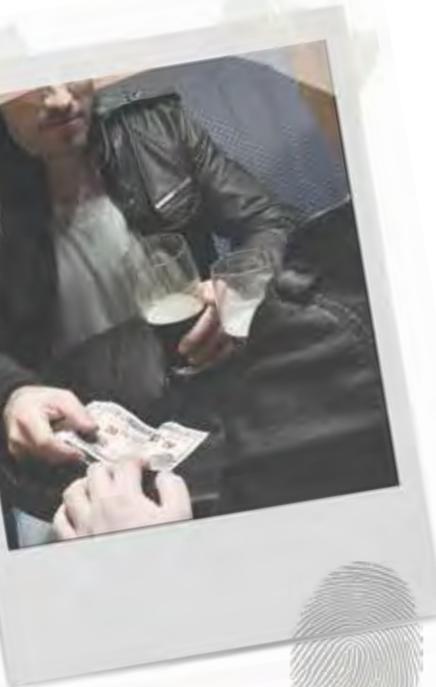
# THE LAW AND COKE

Coke is a class A drug. It is illegal to supply, buy or possess a class A drug.

The maximum penalty for possession of coke is seven years in jail and an unlimited fine. For supplying others with coke the maximum sentence is life in prison and an unlimited fine.

Supplying isn't necessarily large scale drug dealing – buying a few grams for your friends is also considered supplying under the law. A criminal record can:

- make it harder to get a job;
- prevent you from entering certain countries;
- affect your family relationships.



**“In your head you’re not dealing... but being arrested, fined and jailed just for handing over a couple of lines (to friends) that’s scary.”**

**Kevin, Newry**

## WHAT ARE YOU PAYING FOR?

Cocaine is sometimes seen as a glamorous drug, but there is a sinister side. When you buy coke, your money is funding organized crime and terrorism. The global cocaine trade affects many vulnerable people, including children.



If you would like more information on cocaine or any other drug, contact the National Drugs Helpline (Frank) on

**0300 123 6600**

If you are concerned that you may have a drug problem, get in touch with your GP. Your GP will listen to your problem and deal with it in an appropriate manner. If further specialist help is needed, your GP will make the necessary arrangements.

Quotations taken from focus groups conducted across Northern Ireland. Names and locations have been changed.



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