

Chapter 3

Cocaine



Help your brother's boat across, and your own will reach the shore.

-Hindu proverb

## What Is Cocaine?

Cocaine is a central nervous system stimulant, the most powerful found in nature. Most often seen in the form of cocaine hydrochloride, a white, crystalline powder, it is extracted from the leaves of the coca plant, *Erythroxylon coca*, indigenous to the highlands of the Andean mountains in South America. The Incas used coca leaves as a part of their religious rites thousands of years ago. Over the centuries, laborers of the Andes, who toil under harsh conditions, have either chewed coca leaves or brewed tea from them to relieve apoxia (mountain sickness that occurs at high altitudes), hunger, and fatigue and for refreshment.

Cocaine is a powerfully addictive stimulant that directly affects the brain. Cocaine has been labeled the drug of the 1980s and '90s, because of its extensive popularity and use during this period. However, cocaine is not a new drug. In fact, it is one of the oldest known drugs. The pure chemical, cocaine hydrochloride, has been an abused substance for more than 100 years, and coca leaves, the source of cocaine, have been ingested for thousands of years.

In the early 1900s, it became the main stimulant drug used in most of the tonics/elixirs that were developed to treat a wide variety of illnesses. Today, cocaine is a Schedule II drug, meaning that it has high potential for abuse, but can be administered by a doctor for legitimate medical uses, such as a local anesthetic for some eye, ear, and throat surgeries.

There are basically two chemical forms of cocaine: the hydrochloride salt and the freebase. The hydrochloride salt, or powdered form of cocaine, dissolves in water and, when abused, can be taken intravenously (by vein) or intranasally (in the nose). Freebase refers to a compound that has not been neutralized by an acid to make the hydrochloride salt. The freebase form of cocaine is smokable.

Cocaine is generally sold on the street as a fine, white, crystalline powder, known as coke, C, snow, flake, or blow. Street dealers generally dilute it with such inert substances as cornstarch, talcum powder, and/or sugar, or with such active drugs as procaine (a chemically-related local anesthetic) or with such other stimulants as amphetamines.

## What Is Crack?

Crack is the street name given to the freebase form of cocaine that has been processed from the powdered cocaine hydrochloride form to a smokable substance. The term crack refers to the crackling

sound heard when the mixture is smoked. Crack cocaine is processed with ammonia or sodium bicarbonate (baking soda) and water, and heated to remove the hydrochloride.

Because crack is smoked, the user experiences a high in less than 10 seconds. This rather immediate and euphoric effect is one of the reasons that crack became enormously popular. Another reason is that crack is inexpensive both to produce and to buy.

## What Is the Scope of Cocaine Use in the United States?

In 1997, an estimated 1.5 million Americans (0.7 percent of those age 12 and older) were current cocaine users, according to the 1997 National Household Survey on Drug Abuse (NHSDA). This number has not changed significantly since 1992, although it is a dramatic decrease from the 1985 peak of 5.7 million cocaine users (3 percent of the population). Based upon additional data sources that take into account users underrepresented in the NHSDA, the Office of National Drug Control Policy estimates the number of chronic cocaine users at 3.6 million.

Adults 18 to 25 years old have a higher rate of current cocaine use than those in any other age group. Overall, men have a higher rate of current cocaine use than do women. Also, according to the 1997 NHSDA, rates of current cocaine use were 1.4 percent for African Americans, 0.8 percent for Hispanics, and 0.6 percent for Caucasians.

Crack cocaine remains a serious problem in the United States. The NHSDA estimated the number of current crack users to be about 604,000 in 1997, which does not reflect any significant change since 1988.

The 1998 Monitoring the Future Survey, which annually surveys teen attitudes and recent drug use, reports that lifetime and past-year use of crack increased among eighth graders to its highest levels since 1991, the first year data were available for this grade. The percentage of eighth graders reporting crack use at least once in their lives increased from 2.7 percent in 1997 to 3.2 percent in 1998. Past-year use of crack also rose slightly among this group, although no changes were found for other grades.

## How Is Cocaine Used?

The principal routes of cocaine administration are oral, intranasal, intravenous, and inhalation. The slang terms for these routes are, respectively, *chewing*, *snorting*, *mainlining*, *injecting*, and *smoking* (includ-

ing freebase and crack cocaine). Snorting is the process of inhaling cocaine powder through the nostrils, where it is absorbed into the bloodstream through the nasal tissues. Injecting releases the drug directly into the bloodstream, and heightens the intensity of its effects. Smoking involves the inhalation of cocaine vapor or smoke into the lungs, where absorption into the bloodstream is as rapid as by injection. The drug can also be rubbed onto mucous tissues. Some users combine cocaine powder or crack with heroin in a *speedball*.

Cocaine use ranges from occasional use to repeated or compulsive use, with a variety of patterns between these extremes. There is no safe way to use cocaine. Any route of administration can lead to absorption of toxic amounts of cocaine, leading to acute cardiovascular or cerebrovascular emergencies that could result in sudden death. Repeated cocaine use by any route of administration can produce addiction and other adverse health consequences.

### How Does Cocaine Produce Its Effects?

A great amount of research has been devoted to understanding the way cocaine produces its pleasurable effects, and the reasons it is so addictive. One mechanism is through its effects on structures deep in the brain. Scientists have discovered regions within the brain that, when stimulated, produce feelings of pleasure. One neural system that appears to be most affected by cocaine originates in a region, located deep within the brain, called the ventral tegmental area (VTA). Nerve cells originating in the VTA extend to the region of the brain known as the nucleus accumbens, one of the brain's key pleasure centers. In studies using animals, for example, all types of pleasurable stimuli, such as food, water, sex, and many drugs of abuse, cause increased activity in the nucleus accumbens.

Researchers have discovered that, when a pleasurable event is occurring, it is accompanied by a large increase in the amounts of dopamine released in the nucleus accumbens by neurons originating in the VTA. In the normal communication process, dopamine is released by a neuron into the synapse (the small gap between two neurons), where it binds with specialized proteins (called dopamine receptors) on the neighboring neuron, thereby sending a signal to that neuron. Drugs of abuse are able to interfere with this normal communication process. For example, scientists have discovered that cocaine blocks the removal of dopamine from the synapse, resulting in an accumulation of dopamine. This buildup of dopamine causes continuous stimulation of receiving neurons, probably resulting in

the euphoria commonly reported by cocaine abusers.

As cocaine abuse continues, tolerance often develops. This means that higher doses and more frequent use of cocaine are required for the brain to register the same level of pleasure experienced during initial use. Recent studies have shown that, during periods of abstinence from cocaine use, the memory of the euphoria associated with cocaine use, or mere exposure to cues associated with drug use, can trigger tremendous craving and relapse to drug use, even after long periods of abstinence.

### What Are the Short-term Effects of Cocaine Use?

Cocaine's effects appear almost immediately after a single dose, and disappear within a few minutes or hours. Taken in small amounts (up to 100 mg), cocaine usually makes the user feel euphoric, energetic, talkative, and mentally alert, especially to the sensations of sight, sound, and touch. It can also temporarily decrease the need for food and sleep. Some users find that the drug helps them to perform simple physical and intellectual tasks more quickly, while others can experience the opposite effect.

The duration of cocaine's immediate euphoric effects depends upon the route of administration. The faster the absorption, the more intense the high. Also, the faster the absorption, the shorter the duration of action. The high from snorting is relatively slow in onset, and may last 15 to 30 minutes, while that from smoking may last 5 to 10 minutes.

The short-term physiological effects of cocaine include constricted blood vessels; dilated pupils; and increased temperature, heart rate, and blood pressure. Large amounts (several hundred milligrams or more) intensify the user's high, but may also lead to bizarre, erratic, and violent behavior. These users may experience tremors, vertigo, muscle twitches, paranoia, or, with repeated doses, a toxic reaction closely resembling amphetamine poisoning. Some users of cocaine report feelings of restlessness, irritability, and anxiety. In rare instances, sudden death can occur on the first use of cocaine or unexpectedly thereafter. Cocaine-related deaths are often a result of cardiac arrest or seizures followed by respiratory arrest.

### What Are the Long-term Effects of Cocaine Use?

Cocaine is a powerfully addictive drug. Once having tried cocaine, an individual may have difficulty predicting or controlling the extent to which he or she will continue to use the drug. Cocaine's stimulant

and addictive effects are thought to be primarily a result of its ability to inhibit the reabsorption of dopamine by nerve cells. Dopamine is released as part of the brain's reward system, and is either directly or indirectly involved in the addictive properties of every major drug of abuse.

An appreciable tolerance to cocaine's high may develop, with many addicts reporting that they seek but fail to achieve as much pleasure as they did from their first experience. Some users will frequently increase their doses to intensify and prolong the euphoric effects. While tolerance to the high can occur, users can also become more sensitive (sensitization) to cocaine's anesthetic and convulsant effects, without increasing the dose taken. This increased sensitivity may explain some deaths occurring after apparently low doses of cocaine.

Use of cocaine in a binge, during which the drug is taken repeatedly and at increasingly high doses, leads to a state of increasing irritability, restlessness, and paranoia. This may result in a full-blown paranoid psychosis, in which the individual loses touch with reality and experiences auditory hallucinations.

## What Are the Medical Complications of Cocaine Abuse?

There are enormous medical complications associated with cocaine use. Some of the most frequent complications are cardiovascular effects, including disturbances in heart rhythm and heart attacks; such respiratory effects as chest pain and respiratory failure; neurological effects, including strokes, seizure, and headaches; and gastrointestinal complications, including abdominal pain and nausea.

Cocaine use has been linked to many types of heart disease. Cocaine has been found to trigger chaotic heart rhythms, called ventricular fibrillation; accelerate heartbeat and breathing; and increase blood pressure and body temperature. Physical symptoms may include chest pain, nausea, blurred vision, fever, muscle spasms, convulsions and coma.

Different routes of cocaine administration can produce different adverse effects. Regularly snorting cocaine, for example, can lead to loss of sense of smell, nosebleeds, problems with swallowing, hoarseness, and an overall irritation of the nasal septum, which can lead to a chronically inflamed, runny nose. Ingested cocaine can cause severe bowel gangrene, due to reduced blood flow. And, persons who inject

cocaine have puncture marks and *tracks*, most commonly in their forearms. Intravenous cocaine users may also experience an allergic reaction, either to the drug, or to some additive in street cocaine, which can result, in severe cases, in death. Because cocaine has a tendency to decrease food intake, many chronic cocaine users lose their appetites and can experience significant weight loss and malnourishment.

Research has revealed a potentially dangerous interaction between cocaine and alcohol. Taken in combination, the two drugs are converted by the body to cocaethylene. Cocaethylene has a longer duration of action in the brain and is more toxic than either drug alone. While more research needs to be done, it is noteworthy that the mixture of cocaine and alcohol is the most common two-drug combination that results in drug-related death.

## Are Cocaine Abusers At Risk for Contracting HIV/AIDS and Hepatitis B and C?

Yes. Cocaine abusers, especially those who inject, are at increased risk for contracting such infectious diseases as human immunodeficiency virus (HIV/AIDS) and hepatitis. In fact, use and abuse of illicit drugs, including crack cocaine, have become the leading risk factors for new cases of HIV. Drug abuse-related spread of HIV can result from direct transmission of the virus through the sharing of contaminated needles and paraphernalia between injecting drug users. It can also result from indirect transmission, such as an HIV-infected mother transmitting the virus perinatally to her child. This is particularly alarming, given that more than 60 percent of new AIDS cases are women. Research has also shown that drug use can interfere with judgment about risk-taking behavior, and can potentially lead to reduced precautions about having sex, the sharing of needles and injection paraphernalia, and the trading of sex for drugs, by both men and women.

Additionally, hepatitis C is spreading rapidly among injection drug users; current estimates indicate infection rates of 65 to 90 percent in this population. At present, there is no vaccine for the hepatitis C virus, and the only treatment is expensive, often unsuccessful, and may have serious side effects.

## What Is the Effect of Maternal Cocaine Use?

The full extent of the effects of prenatal drug exposure on a child is not completely known, but many scientific studies have docu-

mented that babies born to mothers who abuse cocaine during pregnancy are often prematurely delivered, have low birth weights and smaller head circumferences, and are often shorter in length.

Estimating the full extent of the consequences of maternal drug abuse is difficult, and determining the specific hazard of a particular drug to the unborn child is even more problematic, given that, typically, more than one substance is abused. Such factors as the amount and number of all drugs abused; inadequate prenatal care; abuse and neglect of the children, due to the mother's lifestyle; socio-economic status; poor maternal nutrition; other health problems; and exposure to sexually transmitted diseases, are just some examples of the difficulty in determining the direct impact of perinatal cocaine use, for example, on maternal and fetal outcome.

Many may recall that *crack babies*, or babies born to mothers who used cocaine while pregnant, were written off by many a decade ago as a lost generation. They were predicted to suffer from severe, irreversible damage, including reduced intelligence and social skills. It was later found that this was a gross exaggeration. Most crack-exposed babies appear to recover quite well. However, the fact that most of these children appear normal should not be over-interpreted as a positive sign. Using sophisticated technologies, scientists are now finding that exposure to cocaine during fetal development may lead to subtle, but significant, deficits later, especially with behaviors that are crucial to success in the classroom, such as blocking out distractions and concentrating for long periods of time.

### What Treatments Are Effective for Cocaine Abusers?

There has been an enormous increase in the number of people seeking treatment for cocaine addiction during the 1980s and 1990s. Treatment providers in most areas of the country, except in the West and Southwest, report that cocaine is the most commonly cited drug of abuse among their clients. The majority of individuals seeking treatment smoke crack, and are likely to be poly-drug users, or users of more than one substance. The widespread abuse of cocaine has stimulated extensive efforts to develop treatment programs for this type of drug abuse. Cocaine abuse and addiction is a complex problem involving biological changes in the brain as well as a myriad of social, familial, and environmental factors. Therefore, treatment of cocaine addiction is complex, and must address a variety of problems. Like any good treatment plan, cocaine treatment strategies need to assess the psychobiological, social, and pharmacological

aspects of the patient's drug abuse.

### Pharmacological Approaches

There are no medications currently available to treat cocaine addiction specifically. Consequently, NIDA is aggressively pursuing the identification and testing of new cocaine treatment medications. Several newly emerging compounds are being investigated to assess their safety and efficacy in treating cocaine addiction. For example, one of the most promising anti-cocaine drug medications to date, selegeline, is being taken into multi-site phase III clinical trials in 1999. These trials will evaluate two innovative routes of selegeline administration: a transdermal patch and a time-released pill, to determine which is most beneficial. Disulfiram, a medication that has been used to treat alcoholism, has also been shown, in clinical studies, to be effective in reducing cocaine abuse. Because of mood changes experienced during the early stages of cocaine abstinence, antidepressant drugs have been shown to be of some benefit. In addition to the problems of treating addiction, cocaine overdose results in many deaths every year, and medical treatments are being developed to deal with the acute emergencies resulting from excessive cocaine abuse.

### Behavioral Interventions

Many behavioral treatments have been found to be effective for cocaine addiction, including both residential and outpatient approaches. Indeed, behavioral therapies are often the only available, effective treatment approaches to many drug problems, including cocaine addiction, for which there is, as yet, no viable medication. However, integration of both types of treatments is ultimately the most effective approach for treating addiction.

It is important to match the best treatment regimen to the needs of the patient. This may include adding to or removing from an individual's treatment regimen a number of different components or elements. For example, if an individual is prone to relapses, a relapse component should be added to the program.

A behavioral therapy component that is showing positive results in many cocaine-addicted populations, is contingency management. Contingency management uses a voucher-based system to give positive rewards for staying in treatment and remaining cocaine free. Based on drug-free urine tests, the patients earn points, which can be exchanged for items that encourage healthy living, such as joining a

gym, or going to a movie and dinner. Cognitive-behavioral therapy is another approach.

Cognitive-behavioral coping skills treatment, for example, is a short-term, focused approach to helping cocaine-addicted individuals become abstinent from cocaine and other substances. The underlying assumption is that learning processes play an important role in the development and continuation of cocaine abuse and dependence. The same learning processes can be employed to help individuals reduce drug use. This approach attempts to help patients to recognize, avoid, and cope; i.e., recognize the situations in which they are most likely to use cocaine, avoid these situations when appropriate, and cope more effectively with a range of problems and problematic behaviors associated with drug abuse. This therapy is also noteworthy because of its compatibility with a range of other treatments patients may receive, such as pharmacotherapy.

Therapeutic communities, or residential programs with planned lengths of stay of 6 to 12 months, offer another alternative to those in need of treatment for cocaine addiction. Therapeutic communities are often comprehensive, in that they focus on the resocialization of the individual to society, and can include on-site vocational rehabilitation and other supportive services. Therapeutic communities typically are used to treat patients with more severe problems, such as co-occurring mental health problems and criminal involvement.

## Where Can I Get Further Scientific Information About Cocaine Addiction?

To learn more about cocaine and other drugs of abuse, contact the National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information (NCADI) at 1-800-729-6686. Information specialists are available to assist you in locating needed information and resources.

Fact sheets on the health effects of drug abuse and other topics can be ordered free of charge, in English and Spanish, by calling NIDA INFOFAX at 1-888-NIH-NIDA (1-888-644-6432), or for hearing impaired persons, 1-888-TTY-NIDA (1-888-889-6432).

Information can also be accessed through the NIDA World Wide Web site [www.nida.nih.gov/](http://www.nida.nih.gov/) or the NCADI Web site [www.health.org](http://www.health.org).

## Glossary

**Addiction:** A chronic, relapsing disease, characterized by compulsive drug-seeking and use and by neurochemical and molecular changes

in the brain.

**Anesthetic:** An agent that causes insensitivity to pain.

**Antidepressants:** A group of drugs used in treating depressive disorders.

**Cocacethylene:** Potent stimulant created when cocaine and alcohol are used together.

**Coca:** The plant, *Erythroxylon*, from which cocaine is derived. Also refers to the leaves of this plant.

**Crack:** Short term for a smokable form of cocaine.

**Craving:** A powerful, often uncontrollable desire for drugs.

**Dopamine:** A neurotransmitter present in regions of the brain that regulate movement, emotion, motivation, and the feeling of pleasure.

**Neuron:** A nerve cell in the brain.

**Physical dependence:** An adaptive physiological state that occurs with regular drug use and results in a withdrawal syndrome when drug use is stopped; usually occurs with tolerance.

**Poly-drug user:** An individual who uses more than one drug.

**Rush:** A surge of pleasure that rapidly follows administration of some drugs.

**Tolerance:** A condition in which higher doses of a drug are required to produce the same effect as during initial use; often is associated with physical dependence.

**Vertigo:** The sensation of dizziness.

**Withdrawal:** A variety of symptoms that occur after use of an addictive drug is reduced or stopped.