



# A QUICK GUIDE TO KETAMINE

In terms of usage among young people, ketamine comes just below nitrous oxide in survey data gathered from 15-18 year olds by us at the DSM Foundation, with just under a third of respondents saying that they feel it is used by their peers. This quick guide, developed in conjunction with [Tooled Up Education](#), covers the most important things that parents and carers need to know about ketamine, as well as signposting to further sources of information.



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## WHAT IS KETAMINE?

**Ketamine is a medicine**, used for both animals and humans as an anaesthetic. Its anaesthetising effect explains why ketamine has fallen into recreational use. Individuals want to harness the sense of detachment it can give them (sometimes referred to as dissociation), but it can also cause hallucinations (distortions of sensory inputs such as sight and sound) and altered perception of time and space, alongside numbness of the limbs and strange muscle movements.

The most common presentation of recreational ketamine is a white crystalline powder, which may be snorted or wrapped in a cigarette paper and swallowed (this is known as 'bombing'). Less common are liquid and tablet forms, which may be swallowed – though it tastes bitter and unpleasant – or injected into a muscle. It goes by many names, from the obvious abbreviations "ket" and "K", through the related conjunctions "special K", "super K" and "vitamin K", to street names such as "donkey dust", "wonk" and "green".

The effects generally last for an hour or so and it isn't uncommon for users to experience confusion, anxiety, nausea and vomiting, as well as the effects already described. Because ketamine reduces perception of pain, users can become injured without realising (or appreciating the severity of it) and taking too much can lead to a "**k-hole**" in which the mind and body feel separated from each other. This can be very frightening, and also make the individual extremely vulnerable, for example, to assault.



## WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

There are many risks associated with ketamine use, including the short-term issues already mentioned, plus an increase in heart rate, blood pressure, loss of memory and blackouts. Longer term use can cause abdominal cramps, serious bladder problems and damage to the kidneys and liver. Mental health can be impacted, with regular use linked to depression, psychotic symptoms such as delusions and hallucinations, flashbacks, and difficulties with memory and concentration.

Heavy and/or regular use can lead to tolerance developing, which means that users need to take higher and higher doses to achieve the same effects. This increases the already-present danger of dependence, in which the individual will struggle to control their usage, and get caught up in cycles of withdrawal symptoms and cravings which lead to repeated use.

The comedown with ketamine can be harsh, with users sometimes feeling low in mood and energy for a few days afterwards. And it is worth remembering that someone who is buying and using ketamine for recreational purposes has no guarantee as to the substance they are using in terms of purity, what it has been cut with, or even if it is ketamine at all... any illegal drug is an unknown quantity.

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## WHAT IS THE IMPACT?

- **The risk of injury is very real.** [One study](#) found that over 80% of ketamine users knew someone who had had an accident while high.
- **Because ketamine is an anaesthetic, people can easily underestimate the danger they are in.** For example, they may not realise that the water they are in is too cold and could develop hypothermia.
- **One of the common effects of ketamine is vomiting,** which, coupled with the risk of losing consciousness, means there is a significant risk of choking.
- **Ketamine can exacerbate existing mental health conditions** such as depression and can cause psychotic symptoms – such as those exhibited by people who have schizophrenia – to reemerge.
- **Not all physical damage caused by regular or heavy use is reversible.** For example, some ketamine users have had to have their bladder surgically repaired or even [removed](#).
- **Ketamine is regarded as a particularly strong drug,** which means an increased risk of overdose.
- **Mixing with other substances is always inadvisable,** but specific issues associated with ketamine include reduced coordination, balance and breathing rate (which can be to a fatal level) when taken with anything that has a depressant effect (e.g. [alcohol](#), benzodiazepines, codeine and other opioids), a dangerously accelerated heart rate if combined with a stimulant (e.g. cocaine or ecstasy), and heightened psychedelic experiences if mixed with something that causes such effects (e.g. LSD, magic mushrooms or [cannabis](#)).
- **While use of ketamine has fluctuated over the years, the trend appears to be an upwards one in the UK.** [Data from the Office for National Statistics](#) appears to be supported by a huge increase in the quantity seized by the police and Border Force – [a rise of nearly 900% year on year](#).

## WHAT CAN PARENTS DO?

Parents and carers have a significant role to play in helping their children make decisions about drug use, including ketamine. Here are some tips:



### Discuss coping mechanisms.

Because ketamine has a reputation as a drug that helps people escape from reality, it may be used by people who are struggling in one way or another. Knowing where to look for [healthier strategies](#) can help reduce the chance of this.



### Talk about safe sex.

Having a full grasp of the concept of [consent](#), [contraception](#) and ways to [prevent sexually transmitted infections](#) is always important, but particularly so if there is drug use which can interfere with decision-making abilities.



### Raise the issue of spiking.

Ketamine can make people vulnerable and so it may be used for [spiking](#). Talking about this can help your child spot the signs and reduce the chance of it happening to them



### Understand the law.

Because ketamine is used as a human and veterinary medicine, this can legitimise its recreational use, but in the UK, it is a [Class B drug](#) (alongside cannabis and codeine) so a possession charge risks a five year prison sentence and an unlimited fine, with even harsher penalties for supply.



### Highlight how someone's surroundings can add more risk.

Alongside drug and person, place is the [third dimension of risk](#) when it comes to drug taking and involves a lot of variables. This is particularly relevant with ketamine because of reduced pain perception as well as impaired balance and coordination.



### Check first aid skills.

Knowing the [recovery position](#), the signs of a [medical emergency](#) and [what to do](#) in an emergency situation are vital life lessons.

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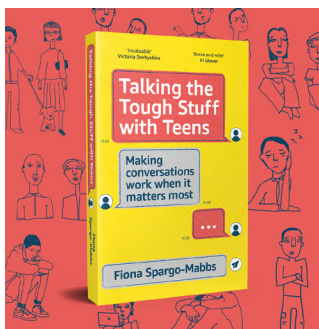
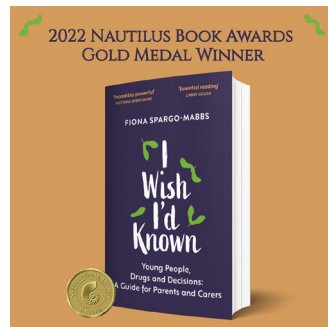
## WHERE CAN I GO FOR MORE INFORMATION?

Healthy, open, non-judgemental conversations with young people can be – literally – life-saving.

**Fiona Spargo Mabbs OBE**, founder and director of the **DSM Foundation** has written two books that are packed with advice and information.

Award-winner,  
***I Wish I'd Known***

interweaves the story of one family's terrible loss with calm, measured and practical suggestions for parents about young people, drugs and decisions.



### ***Talking the Tough Stuff with Teens***

draws extensively on hundreds of conversations with young people and parents in focus groups and

school and college workshops, to give a warm and compassionate framework for tackling tough conversations about difficult things, without judgement or anger. It covers everything from curfews and screen time, to sex, self-harm and suicide.



Resources to check out

**The DSM Foundation**, our drugs education charity, has a number of resources to support parents and carers in their conversations with young people about alcohol including a [video on ketamine](#) and [information on risks and harm reduction](#).

Talk to Frank has useful [information on ketamine](#), as does [Drug Science](#), and [harm reduction advice](#) is available from Crew.

Information on cannabis, including detailed knowledge on legal status and changes, is available from [DrugWise](#).

It's important to remember that these resources are not a replacement for clinical or specialist support. If you are worried about your child, always consult your GP or other relevant professional.

**Tooled Up Education** is thrilled to be collaborating with the DSM Foundation. Toolled Up brings evidence-based resources to school communities and enjoys strong relationships with some of the most respected researchers and organisations in the world. The Toolled Up Team dedicates its time to studying thousands of hours of research evidence and turning this into easy to use resources, in the form of videos, articles, podcasts, activities and tips to try.