



# A QUICK GUIDE TO COCAINE

Around 14% of 15-18 year olds surveyed by the DSM Foundation for our 2022-23 schools survey said that they think cocaine is used by their peers. This quick guide, developed in conjunction with Tooled Up Education, covers information that parents and carers need to know about this drug, as well as signposting to additional resources.



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## WHAT IS COCAINE?

Cocaine comes from the leaves of the coca plant, which is native to South America. It is a stimulant, and a powerful one at that. Effects such as a surge in energy and alertness levels are among the reasons some people might use it. The most common form is white crystalline cocaine powder, which is usually snorted, though it can be injected or smoked. It is also sometimes processed into a more solid substance referred to as crack cocaine. This is typically smoked and is even more addictive than the powder form.

Like many drugs, cocaine is known by a wide range of different names: some of those used for powder cocaine include "Charlie", "coke", "blow", "dust", "sniff", "snow", "toot", "white" and "lady", while nicknames for crack cocaine include "base", "freebase", "gravel", "rock", "stones" and "wash".

Cocaine makes the brain more receptive to dopamine (which is linked to reward and pleasure) and adrenaline (which increases heart rate, blood pressure, alertness and energy levels), as well as causing an increase in serotonin (which is associated with an uplift in mood). This explains the effects of cocaine that users are likely to perceive they will experience: euphoria, confidence, increased energy, mental clarity and elevated mood.



When snorted, cocaine takes between five and 30 minutes to kick in, with the initial high lasting around 20 to 30 minutes on average. However, some effects, such as raised heart rate and a sense of edginess, will endure for longer. Smoking crack has an almost instantaneous effect, peaking for around two minutes and often wearing off after just 10 minutes, though again some effects will last longer. The duration of the comedown, conversely, is considerably longer (see later).

Government data for the year ending June 2022 puts powder cocaine as the most commonly used Class A drug in [England and Wales](#) with 2% of adults aged 16–59 years old saying they had used it (but 4% of 16–24 year olds). It is also cited in a significant number of drug deaths; cocaine was involved in the deaths of 857 people in England and Wales in 2022. In Scotland, where data is gathered slightly differently, cocaine was implicated in [over a third of drug misuse deaths](#) in 2022, often alongside other substances such as opioids, and there has been an increase in excess of 300% in the number of [Cocaine Anonymous](#) meetings held in Scotland, which gives a sense of the scale of the problem.



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## WHAT'S THE PROBLEM?

There are many downsides to cocaine. In the short term, the amplification of vital functions such as heart rate and blood pressure pose a significant risk to individuals with certain underlying health conditions. For example, someone with circulation or blood pressure problems is at increased risk of a heart attack or stroke. It can also cause agitation, anxiety (both of which may exacerbate pre-existing mental health problems), irritability, impulsivity (which may lead to further alcohol or drug use), nausea, increased libido (which when coupled with increased energy, confidence and aggression may also put others at risk), overheating, and impaired thinking and memory.

The comedown from cocaine can be harsh, which means someone who uses it is likely to be very tired, low in mood, anxious and irritable as it wears off. They are also likely to experience difficulty concentrating and insomnia or disturbed sleep, and notice an increase in appetite. The comedown can last from [hours to days](#).

Habitual or frequent users of cocaine are likely to develop tolerance quite quickly, which means they experience fewer of the things that they view as positive effects. This, in turn, may mean that they take more. Longer term use has also been associated with many negative effects, including several mental health conditions such as anxiety, depression, paranoia and psychosis, plus problems with the heart and circulation, breathing and sexual functioning.



A significant issue with cocaine is the potential for addiction, which is thought to be particularly high due to how it affects the brain. Essentially, it makes the brain less sensitive to the chemicals dopamine and adrenaline, which means the body doesn't regulate its usual functions as well as would otherwise be the case. This means individuals use more cocaine to feel "normal", and so the cycle continues. There is also [evidence](#) that regular cocaine use can increase the risk of addiction more widely, i.e. not just associated with this particular drug.



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## WHAT IS THE IMPACT?

As well as the risks already described, there are some circumstances under which the dangers increase:

- **Snorting cocaine puts the cartilage that separates the nostrils under [huge strain](#)**, leading to a reduced sense of smell, nosebleeds, pain when swallowing, a runny or blocked nose, recurrent infections, and physical deterioration.
- **Other methods of administration introduce [additional risks](#)**. Smoking crack or injecting, for example, can lead to breathing problems, damage to blood vessels and the respiratory system, and blood-borne infections such as HIV and hepatitis.
- **It's hard to tell what it's actually made from**. The most familiar form of cocaine is white powder, but this makes it indistinguishable from other products that have this appearance. Unless tested, it is impossible to establish purity and what the cocaine has been [mixed with](#). These other substances may be innocuous albeit unpleasant (such as caffeine or laxatives), but could be downright dangerous (for example, laundry detergent, opioids such as fentanyl or corrosive chemicals).
- **Any drug when pregnant is a bad idea, but [cocaine use](#)** can cause miscarriage, premature labour and damage to the unborn baby. Using cocaine when breastfeeding may mean the drug passes through breast milk, rendering the baby restless, agitated and difficult to feed.
- **Mixing with other substances is always inadvisable**, but cocaine seems to be associated with more than its fair share of dangerous interactions. [Alcohol plus cocaine](#) leads to production in the body of cocaethylene, which is toxic to several organs including the heart and liver. Combining cocaine with another stimulant such as MDMA or amphetamines, psychedelics such as LSD or magic mushrooms, or dissociatives such as ketamine, increases the risk of unpredictable and possibly perilous effects.
- **There are also [serious interactions](#) between cocaine and many medicines**. For example, anything that cites drowsiness as a possible side effect, such as opioid painkillers, antidepressants or antihistamines, can make it difficult to judge the effect of both the cocaine and the medication.



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How can you tell what any of these are?



## WHAT CAN PARENTS DO?

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



### Chat about contamination.

Many things come as a light coloured powder, and highlighting this is a good way to open up a conversation about the [unknown nature](#) of cocaine and other drugs, both in terms of purity and what else they might contain.



### Strength in numbers.

Using drugs alone is very risky – there is nobody to notice, let alone help, if something goes wrong, for a start. Framing conversations about how it can be good to be the sensible sober friend who makes sure others are safe can be a powerful thing to do.



### Let's talk about sex.

As a stimulant, cocaine can increase feelings of arousal and lower inhibitions, so having a good handle on consent and safe sex practices is important.



### Shine a light on trafficking.

Global supply of cocaine is at record levels and comes at a [huge cost](#): human suffering due to the intense picking and refining process, the environmental impact of [deforestation](#), smuggling via drug mules, the financial backing it gives to [organised crime](#)...



### Understand the law.

In the UK, cocaine is a [Class A drug](#), which means it is illegal to possess, give away or sell. Passing something to a friend is regarded as supply, and has much harsher penalties than a possession charge (life imprisonment versus up to seven years, and/or an unlimited fine for both).



### Address addiction.

Nobody takes something for the first time thinking they will become dependent on it, but the risk of this happening with cocaine is considerable. Talking about it in the broadest terms and discussing the profound [impact](#) it can have on every area of life can be sobering.

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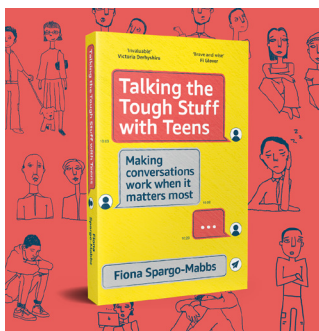
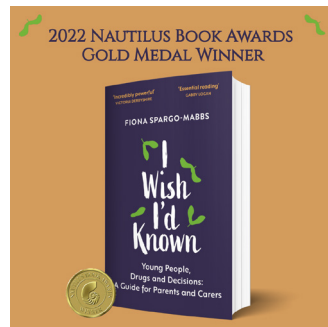
## WHERE CAN I GO FOR MORE INFORMATION?

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***

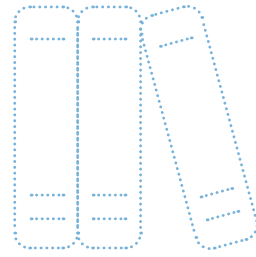
interweaves the story of one family's terrible loss with calm, measured and practical suggestions for parents about young people, drugs and decisions.



### ***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 including a [video on cocaine](#) made by Head of Education and Engagement Asha Fowells, and information about the [risks of illegal drugs and harm reduction](#).

Talk to Frank has useful [information on cocaine](#), as does [Drug Science](#) and [DrugWise](#), with harm reduction advice available from Crew and a resource on cocaine dependence available from the [Royal College of Psychiatrists](#).

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. **Tooled 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 **Tooled 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.