

# Crack

## Crack (Cocaine)

Cocaine is a powerfully addictive stimulant. It is an illegal drug but it can be given by health care providers as a local anesthetic for some eye, ear and throat surgeries.

Crack is the crystal form of cocaine. Users mix it with ammonia or baking soda and water, and heat it to remove the hydrochloride salt. The result is a form of cocaine that can be smoked. (The name “crack” comes from the crackling sound heard when the mixture is heated.)

As a street drug, crack is known as “black rock,” “CDs,” “real tops,” “rocks” and “electric Kool-Aid®,” among others. Street dealers generally sell crack as a form of cocaine that is smoked, but crack may also be injected.

Crack is the freebase form of cocaine. Cocaine powder or crack combined with heroin is known as a speedball. When cocaine and alcohol are taken together, the liver makes a third substance (cocaethylene). This substance makes the euphoric effects more intense and can raise the risk of sudden death.

## Addiction

Addiction to cocaine or crack can occur after only one use. Cocaine disrupts the way the brain releases dopamine, a chemical that provides pleasure. A buildup of dopamine gives the user feelings of pleasure (euphoria).

Smoking crack gives users a nearly instant high that lasts about 5 to 10 minutes. It is more addictive to use crack than cocaine.

When taking cocaine in small amounts, the user feels energetic, talkative and mentally alert. These feelings appear almost right away and disappear within a few minutes or hours. (The euphoric high from crack occurs in fewer than 10 seconds.) The faster the cocaine is absorbed by the body, the more intense the high.

When taking cocaine in large amounts, the user may have strange and violent behavior, tremors, dizziness (vertigo), muscle twitches, paranoia or feelings of restlessness and anxiety. The user may be a danger to self and others.

After coming down from the high, the user crashes with intense feelings of depression and the need for more cocaine. Some users need more cocaine to get the same level of pleasure as the first use. This process is known as tolerance.

People addicted to crack lose interest in things they previously enjoyed. They eat and sleep less than normal, which can lead to weight loss and malnourishment.

In general, men use cocaine more often than women. Adults between 18 to 25 years old have the highest rate of cocaine use.

## Effects of Crack Use

Crack can cause the following effects.

- smaller (constricted) blood vessels
- decreased appetite
- increased temperature
- increased heart rate and blood pressure
- restlessness
- irritability
- anxiety
- addiction
- respiratory problems such as coughing, shortness of breath, severe chest pains, lung problems and bleeding
- paranoia.

## Medical Complications

A single dose of crack can cause a heart attack, stroke, seizure, respiratory failure or abdominal pain. Using crack while pregnant puts the baby at risk for a low birth weight, smaller head circumference and shorter length.

Death can occur after the first use or after many years of use.

## Treatment

There is currently no medicine to treat crack addiction. The best available treatment is behavioral therapy. The user may have therapy as an outpatient or while staying at a health care facility. As part of therapy, the user may have:

- contingency management: The user gets rewards for staying in treatment and remaining crack-free. Earning points for drug-free urine tests, the user can exchange the points for items that encourage healthy living.
- cognitive-behavioral therapy: The user learns coping skills to help break the cycle. This type of therapy teaches the user to recognize the situations in which they are most likely to use crack, how to avoid those situations, and how to cope with the problems that go with drug abuse.

Treatment programs help the user get back into society, work-related rehabilitation and other supportive services.

**Information adapted from the White House  
Office of National Drug Control Policy.**