



STIMULANTS

Stimulants are drugs that speed up the messages transmitted between the central nervous system and the body. Three common stimulants are cocaine, ecstasy, and amphetamines.

COCAINE

What does it look like?

Cocaine hydrochloride is a white crystalline powder. Cocaine hydrochloride can produce cocaine base (freebase) and “crack”. Freebase is a white powder while crack comes in the form of crystals that range in colour from white to transparent with a pink or yellow hue.

Cocaine hydrochloride is most commonly “snorted” (sniffed through the nose). It can also be injected, or rubbed into the gums where it is absorbed into the bloodstream. Freebase and crack cocaine are usually smoked.

Cocaine use in Australia

The 2007 National Drug Strategy Household Survey showed 5.9 per cent of Australians aged 14 years and older have used, and 1.6 per cent have used cocaine in the previous 12 months (2008 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare).

Effects: Immediate

The effects of cocaine can last anywhere from a few minutes to a couple of hours depending on how the cocaine is taken and the individual taking it.

- Psychological effects:
 - immediate “rush” feeling/ feelings of intense pleasure euphoria and a sense of well being
 - increased talkativeness or quiet contemplation and rapture
 - increased confidence and feelings of physical strength and increased mental capacity
 - increased libido and elevated sexual arousal
 - anxiety, agitation and panic
 - paranoia, and
 - unpredictable violent/ aggressive behaviour.

- Physical effects:
 - enlarged pupils
 - dry mouth
 - increased breathing rate
 - headache
 - increased blood pressure and heart rate
 - reduced appetite
 - increased body temperature, and
 - indifference to pain.

Effects: Higher doses

When taken in greater quantities the effects are intensified and people may also experience tremors, muscle twitches, nausea, rapid/ weak pulse, arrhythmia (heart murmur) chest pain, heart attack, hyperthermia, seizures and stroke.

High quantities and frequent, heavy and long-term use of cocaine may lead to a “cocaine psychosis”, characterised by paranoid delusions and hallucinations.

Overdoses can result in increased heart rate and body temperature, seizures, heart attack, brain haemorrhage, kidney failure, stroke and convulsions which can result in death.

Tolerance and dependence

People who use cocaine can develop a tolerance to the euphoric effects very quickly. Users then need to take increasing amounts of the drug to achieve the euphoric effect, possibly leading to dependence.

People who are psychologically dependent on cocaine find that using the drug is more important than other activities in their life. Due to cocaine’s euphoric effects, people can develop a strong psychological dependence on it.

Withdrawal

Cocaine withdrawal usually occurs in three phases. The “crash” phase may include agitation, depression/ anxiety,

intense cravings for cocaine, insomnia, extreme fatigue and feelings of intense hunger. The “withdrawal” phase may include severe cravings for cocaine, lack of energy, anhedonia (inability to feel pleasure), anxiety, and angry outbursts. The “extinction” phase involves intermittent cravings for cocaine, generally occurring in response to people, places or objects that are conditioned cues and provoke memories of taking the drug.

AMPHETAMINES

What do they look like?

Amphetamines are a family of related drugs – each with its own recipe. They can be in the form of a powder, tablets, capsules or crystals.

How are they taken?

Amphetamines are most commonly swallowed, injected or smoked. They are also “snorted” (sniffed through the nose).

Use in Australia

The 2007 National Drug Strategy Household Survey showed 6.3 per cent of Australians aged 14 years and older have used, and 2.3 per cent have used amphetamines in the previous 12 months (2008 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare).

Effects: Immediate

The immediate effects of amphetamines are:

- speeding up of bodily functions: heart rate, breathing and blood pressure increase
- dry mouth
- increased sweating
- enlargement of the pupils
- headaches
- feelings of increased energy and confidence
- heightened sense of wellbeing
- restlessness
- difficulty sleeping
- anxiousness; and
- increased aggression.

Effects: Higher doses

In greater quantities, users may experience paleness, headaches, dizziness, blurred vision, tremors, irregular heartbeat, stomach cramps, irregular breathing and loss of coordination.

High quantities and/ or frequent use can also create an “amphetamine psychosis” characterized by paranoid delusions, hallucinations and bizarre, aggressive behaviour. These symptoms usually disappear a few days after ceasing use.

Coming down

As the effects of amphetamines begin to wear off, a person may experience a range of symptoms such as violent feelings, tension, mood swings, depression and physical exhaustion.

Effects: Overdose

Amphetamine overdose can occur and users have experienced strokes, heart failure, seizures, and high body temperature. Death from amphetamine overdose is possible. Injecting amphetamines increases the risk of overdose.

Effects: Long-term

Long-term effects include:

- brain damage
- immune system: regular users find that their resistance to infections is reduced
- high blood pressure and rapid/ irregular heartbeat
- malnutrition; and
- chronic sleeping problems.

Tolerance and dependence

People who are physically dependent on amphetamines usually develop tolerance to the drug, making it necessary to take increasing amounts to get the same effect.

Dependence on amphetamines can be psychological, physical or both. People who are psychologically dependent on amphetamines find that using them becomes far more important than other activities in their life. They will crave the drug and find it difficult to stop using it. People who are physically dependent on amphetamines find that their body becomes used to functioning with amphetamines in their system.

Withdrawal

People who are dependent on amphetamines will experience withdrawal symptoms because their body has to readjust to functioning without the drug.

ECSTASY

Ecstasy is similar in structure and effect to amphetamines and hallucinogens, and is the street term for a range of drugs that are similar to MDMA.

What does it look like?

Ecstasy usually comes in tablet form, in a variety of shapes, sizes and colours. Manufacturers may substitute other drugs, including amphetamines, PMA or ketamine to simulate the effects of MDMA.

How is it used?

The most common way to take ecstasy is by swallowing. Other methods include crushing and snorting or injecting it.

Ecstasy use in Australia

The 2007 National Drug Strategy Household Survey showed 8.9 per cent of Australians aged 14 years and older have used, and 3.5 per cent have used ecstasy in the previous 12 months (2008 Australian Institute of Health and Welfare).

Effects: Immediate

There are commonly three phases to the drug's effects:

- The "coming up" phase symptoms include nausea, increased heart rate, increased body temperature, increased heart rate and blood pressure, jaw clenching and muscle stiffness and dilated pupils. Users may have difficulty focusing and understanding what is happening which may result in anxiety.
- The "plateau" phase includes a feeling of happiness, a heightened sense of perception, increased energy and confidence, loss of inhibition, and feelings of empathy towards others. Users may also experience muscle aches, nausea, teeth grinding, skin tingles, anxiety and paranoia.
- The "coming down" phase usually makes people feel physically exhausted, depressed and irritable. Some other effects include insomnia, anxiety and difficulty concentrating.

Effects: Higher quantities

Taking greater quantities does not appear to enhance pleasurable effects and may cause:

- convulsions (fits)
- vomiting
- floating sensations
- irrational behaviour, and
- hallucinations.

Effects: Overdose

Ecstasy users can experience overdose and it is usually characterised by very high body temperature and blood pressure, hallucinations and an elevated heartbeat. It is especially dangerous for people with existing heart conditions, breathing problems, depression or other psychological disorders.

The toxic effects of ecstasy that can lead to death include:

- heart attack
- brain haemorrhage
- blood clotting
- kidney failure
- overheating, and
- drinking too much water.

Tolerance and dependence

People who use ecstasy may develop a tolerance to the drug's effects. However using larger amounts tends to increase the severity of undesirable effects rather than increase pleasurable ones.

At present there is no conclusive proof that people can become physically dependent on ecstasy. However, it is possible for people to become psychologically dependent, making it difficult for them to stop or reduce their use.

STIMULANTS AND THE LAW

The three drugs listed above are all illegal to possess, use and sell within Australia. Penalties vary between each State/ Territory but generally range from fines through to imprisonment. Some States and Territories have instituted discretionary justice diversion schemes and mandate drug counselling or treatment programs. However jail terms can apply if diversion programs are not complied with.

IN EMERGENCIES ALWAYS CALL 000.

Ambulance officers are not obliged to involve the police if called to attend to a suspected overdose. Don't delay if you think your friends are in need of assistance.

GUIDELINES FOR SAFER DANCING

Stimulants are commonly used in nightclubs and other events where people engage in vigorous dancing for a long period time. This places the body under greater stress and can potentially increase the negative side-effects of stimulants.

Adopting these tips may reduce the risk of harm:

- regularly sip on water, rather than drink it all at once. When dancing aim to sip 500ml an hour, if sitting down, aim to sip 250ml an hour
- wear light, loose fitting clothing
- take regular rests (15 minutes after every hour); and
- if you feel that your body hasn't cooled down, or that your breathing or heart rate is too fast, seek first aid, call 000 or go to a hospital.



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Department of Health and Ageing

