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Parent and Youth Support Groups

FACTS ABOUT COCAINE

Also called Snow, Flake, Blow, Crystal, Nose Candy, Rock, or Freebase, Cocaine has many names that change according to what's in vogue. One thing that doesn't change is the devastation caused by cocaine abuse.

WHAT IS COCAINE?

Cocaine is a drug extracted from the leaves of the coca plant (*Erythroxylon coca*) which grows in South America. In the late 1800's medical science desperately searched for something to relieve the pain associated with surgery; something more than a swig of liquor. Cocaine was discovered and became widely used as an anesthetic. The virtues of this miracle drug quickly spread until there were thousands of products, including Coca-Cola, which had varying amounts of cocaine as an ingredient. No wonder people used patent medicines, they were getting high on cocaine; thousands died. The Harrison Narcotic Act was passed to prevent further abuse of cocaine. Cocaine appears in several different forms. Cocaine hydrochloride (salt) is the most available form of the drug. It is usually sniffed or snorted into the nose, although some users inject it or smoke a form of the drug known as "freebase or crack." When cocaine is snorted, the effects begin within a few seconds, peak within fifteen to twenty minutes and disappear within an hour. Users describe the "high" as a pleasurable and intense feeling similar to sexual orgasm. The physical effects include dilated pupils and increase in blood pressure, heart rate, breathing rate, and body temperature. The user may have a sense of well-being and feel more energetic or alert, and less hungry.

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WHAT IS FREEBASE OR CRACK?

These are street names for a form of cocaine that is processed using highly volatile solvents like Ether. The solvents dissolve the hydrochloride (salt) making the drug more suitable for smoking. Smoking freebase produces a shorter and more intense "high" than most other ways of using the drug; smoking is the most direct way to get the drug to the brain. Because larger amounts of the drug are getting to the brain more quickly, smoking also increases the risks associated with using the drug. These risks include confusion, slurred speech, anxiety, and serious psychological problems. The duration of the freebase high is very short. To prevent the withdrawal symptoms, cocaine smokers find themselves using more and more of the drug to maintain the high.

IS IT ADDICTING?

YES. Cocaine is a very addicting, very dangerous, dependence-producing drug. For years cocaine was thought not to be an addictive substance, and safe to use, despite its history. The test for addiction is: Are there physical withdrawal symptoms? Does the body build up a tolerance, therefore increased amounts are needed to get a reaction (high)? It was not until recently that researchers have proven that cocaine is a powerfully addicting drug. In one study, monkeys were given a choice of food or cocaine. The monkeys died of starvation. The studies combined with medical histories of patients seeking treatment, prove beyond a doubt that cocaine is in fact addicting. The unintentional side effects of cocaine abuse range from alarming to deadly. The cocaine user often becomes irritable, experiences severe paranoia, and hallucinations (coke bugs). Other side effects are sores and ulcers of the nasal membranes, perforation of the septum, the mucus membrane that separates the passages

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of the nose. Abusers who inject cocaine are considered in the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) high risk category. Cocaine users will lose interest in their family, sex, jobs, just about everything, except using more cocaine. Overdose deaths result from respiratory or cardiac failure and/or convulsions. These are documented cases where someone who experimented with cocaine for the first time, died from a severe allergic reaction to the cocaine or another substance used to dilute (step on) it. People use cocaine because they like its effects and can get to the point of centering their lives around seeking and using the drug. Coming down off cocaine will produce depression and fatigue, users resort to continued use of cocaine to ward off these and other withdrawal symptoms. Recovered users will tell anyone who will listen, that there is never enough cocaine or money to buy cocaine, when you are addicted. Hardly a day now passes where a professional athlete, actor or some other person of prominence is reported to be addicted to cocaine in the media. Can you imagine the number of others whose careers, families and their very lives are devastated because of cocaine use?

WHAT DO I LOOK FOR?

Beside the physical effects we have described, there is the paraphernalia associated with cocaine use. Items used to prepare and snort cocaine are razor blades to chop it; tubes or tiny spoons used to inhale the drug usually off a small glass mirror. Smokers of freebase use glass pipes known as "bongs" or other unusual looking pipes. Cutting agents such as lactose (milk sugar) or mannitol, a baby laxative, may also be found.

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