

“Cocaine isn't habit forming. I should know - I've been using it for years”

Tallulah Bankhead (American actress)

Cocaine – or blast, or blow, or booth, or c, or cola, or white dust, or any of the names it is called with – and crack Cocaine are both based on extracts from the coca plant. In whichever format it comes, be it powder or rocks, it is a powerful stimulant. Users get high very quickly, experiencing feelings of strength, alertness, happiness and lack of inhibitions. These are the ‘positive’ characteristics that the substance is usually associated with.

However, Cocaine is prone to change your personality in a negative way too, and the risks are numerous. It affects the way you feel about yourself, the way you feel about others and the way others see you. Apart from the sensation of euphoria, Cocaine users also feel agitated and twitchy, start getting nervous and paranoid thinking that others around them are constantly talking about them. They get upset very easily when they start chatting so much and no one would listen to them anymore. Their behaviour turns aggressive, they start being arrogant and loud, and basically just interested in when they are going for their next line. Although s/he might feel gorgeous, really a Cocaine user is one who sweats profusely, grind their teeth and look pale.

There is a myriad of effects, both physical and psychological, of Cocaine which should not be ignored. What is also dangerous is the fact that those already using the substance, undermine its danger and in fact believe the several myths surrounding Cocaine use.

Cocaine Effects

Cocaine can make you feel ‘good’, but it is very addictive and it can easily become a habit that controls the user’s life. Without any reservation it has both physical and psychological effects and they are as serious as those of other mind-altering substances.

Some of the physical effects are high blood pressure (which can even result in fatal strokes), heart disease, crack lung (severe chest pains, breathing problems and high temperature), kidney problems, blood clots, blood borne diseases such as HIV and Hepatitis through used syringes and sexual contacts under the effect of Cocaine, digestive problems, impotence, damage in the nose structure and nosebleeds, amongst others.

The psychological effects include dipression, anxiety, panic attacks, paranoia and hallucinations. In extreme cases, the user also gets Cocaine-induced psychosis.

A very risky practice is to mix Cocaine with alcohol. When these two substances are mixed, they form a third substance – cocaethylene – which is toxic and more harmful than Cocaine or alcohol taken separatley.

Myths about Cocaine

Myth - Cocaine isn't addictive.

Fact - While not regarded as physically addictive, Cocaine can produce severe psychological dependence because of the strong cravings it produces, leading to compulsive patterns of use and also making the person dependent on the positive feelings emanating from the drug. As tolerance develops, users take larger and more frequent dose to maintain 'the high'. Furthermore, not using Cocaine everyday does not mean that you do not have a problem. The problem is not the frequency but the denial of having a dependency by the abuser.

Myth - Cocaine is a clean, safe drug.

Fact - Despite its 'clean/safe' image, common physical effects include sweating, loss of appetite, damage to the inside of the nose and increased heart and pulse rate. Some people experience nausea, headaches, irritability, paranoia and hallucinations. Cocaine (even taken on its own) can affect heart rhythms, leading to possible heart attacks, raised blood pressure, respiratory failure and strokes. Cocaine can also result in an overdose.

Myth - Cocaine use improves sexual desire and performance.

Fact - Increased sexual desire immediately after taking the drug often leads to unsafe sexual behaviour, risking unplanned pregnancy and leaving users susceptible to HIV, Hepatitis B and sexually transmitted infections. Long-term use may result in reduced sexual drive, development of breasts in men and impotence.

Myth - There is no 'hangover' with Cocaine.

Fact - The short term after-effects of use include fatigue and depression. The 'crash' or 'low' that follows the 'high' can be severe, and can lead to depression and suicidal thoughts and acts. Chronic use can lead to paranoia, hallucinations, anxiety attacks and agitation. Aggressive and violent behaviour are another common result of increased Cocaine use.

2007 ESPAD Results

The results of the latest International Report on the European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD) were published a few weeks ago.

The ESPAD provides a reliable overview of trends and a comprehensive picture of licit and illicit drug use among European adolescents. This study, which locally is carried out by Sedqa in collaboration with the Guidance and Counselling Services within the Ministry for Education, Culture, Youth & Sports, has become a leading measure of substance abuse among young people in Malta. It offers a scientific indication of the prevalence of substance misuse and the prevailing attitudes and significant factors that influence both prevalence and attitude, thus offering a scientific base for professionals in the field.

This is the fourth ESPAD study, which was conducted in 2007 in 35 countries across Europe amongst 15-16 year old students, following the surveys conducted in 26 countries in 1995, 30 countries in 1999 and 35 countries in 2003.

This edition of the study shows that the percentage of Maltese students who reported using any illicit drug except cannabis (this includes ecstasy, amphetamines, LSD or other hallucinogens, crack, Cocaine and heroin) is higher than the average in the other participating European countries. Furthermore there has been an increase in lifetime use of illicit substances amongst Maltese respondents on the whole, when compared to previous ESPAD studies. This increase is predominantly due to increases in amphetamines, followed by Cocaine, ecstasy and LSD – the stimulants.

Comparing the rates of Cocaine use between the first edition of ESPAD in 1993, and the most recent one carried out in 2007, it is apparent that the rate has doubled from 2% to 4% of respondents claiming to have used Cocaine at least once in their lifetime.

Sedqa's statistics also show that Cocaine is getting more popular than ever among those who access the Agencies services. It is not considered the rich man's drug anymore, as its wide availability and accessibility has made it more popular and affordable.

Having young people abusing such dangerous and mind-altering substance will not only hinder their physical development and leave long-term repercussions on their physical and psychological health, but will also translate into serious social troubles. The Maltese ESPAD participants reported that they had poor performance at school and at work, having serious problems with friends and having sexual relationships without protection as the top three consequences of personal drug use in the 12 months prior to the study. Other reported consequences include physical violence, trouble with family members, having unwanted sexual relationships, and trouble with the police, amongst others. (ESPAD 2007)

What help is available

Sedqa offers support to persons having a drug problem

- *Supportline* 179 – freephone helpline accessible 24 hours a day
- Individual support to the person having a drug problem and even with family members
- Relapse Prevention
- Harm Reduction
- Medical assistance
- Time-out at Sedqa's Detox In-patients Unit *Dar Impenn*

This year Sedqa has embarked on an educational campaign about the dangers of using cocaine. This campaign will be launched in the coming weeks and will include various initiatives targeted towards young people, highlighting the effects and risks of cocaine abuse. More information out soon.

References:

1. <http://www.nida.nih.gov/DrugPages/Cocaine.html>
2. <http://www.irishhealth.com/article.html?id=7819>
3. <http://www.talktofrank.com/>
4. <http://www.knowthescore.info>
5. Hibell, B., Ahlstrom, S., Balakireva, O., Bjarnason, T., Kokkevi, A., and Kraus, L (2009). The 2007 ESPAD Report: Substance Use Among Students in 35

European Countries. Stockholm, Sweden: The Swedish Council for Information on Alcohol and Other Drugs.

A copy of the 2007 ESPAD Report can be viewed on www.sedqa.gov.mt.

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