

CRACK

REDUCE THE HARMS



CRACK FACTSHEET

#DoYouUseCocaine

WHAT IS CRACK?

Crack is a form of cocaine made by chemically altering cocaine powder to form 'crystals' or 'rocks' which can be heated to produce vapours that are inhaled.

Crack is an addictive, stimulant drug which can make people feel more alert, energetic and confident. In addition to the effects there are significant health risks.

The effects of crack wear off very quickly, prompting the person to repeat the dose in a binge type pattern which increases the risks to health.

Crack has a more intense and immediate effect because it is delivered to the brain much faster than cocaine powder with effects much stronger.

Crack cocaine has been available in Ireland for a number of years with literature suggesting that drug treatment services began to notice an increase in use in the late 1990s.

Administration

Smoking/piping: Crack is most commonly smoked through a pipe. Using homemade pipes created from tin cans and water bottles is not recommended. People are advised to contact local addiction services to access approved pipes, if available.

Injecting: Crack can be dissolved in water and injected. Among certain user groups, cocaine is sometimes injected in conjunction with heroin in what is known as a 'speedball'.

Crack Effects

The effects of crack start quickly but are short lived. Smoking crack produces an immediate intense high because in vapour form it is delivered to the brain very quickly. Crack causes the release of the chemical dopamine in brain circuits and this results in a euphoric feeling or 'high'. This high is often followed by what is known as a 'crash' or 'comedown' where the person can feel very low.

Possible short-term effects

- Feeling alert, energetic, exhilarated and confident
- Heart rate can suddenly speed up and blood pressure could increase
- Raised body temperature
- Restlessness
- Hyperactivity
- Dilated pupils
- Dry mouth
- Sweating
- Nausea
- Loss of appetite
- Increased sex drive
- Paranoia and irritability
- A crash/comedown with possible suicidal thoughts

Possible long term effects

- Constriction of blood vessels which can interrupt blood flow to the respiratory and gastrointestinal systems
- Cardiovascular damage
- Stroke
- Insomnia, exhaustion and inability to relax
- Marked changes in mood and behaviour
- Loss of appetite
- Feeling aggressive/ becoming violent
- Anxiety and feeling depressed with possible suicidal thoughts
- Paranoia and hallucinations
- Digestive disorders associated with reduced blood flow
- Kidney and liver problems
- Possible loss of sex drive if used long term
- Injecting may cause abscesses
- Weight loss
- Financial issues/drug-related debt
- Dependence

Overdose

Cocaine/crack can raise the body's temperature, cause convulsions, a heart attack and heart failure.

It is possible for cocaine users to die from an overdose. With stimulant type drugs, the risk of overdose increases with the amount used. The risk of overdosing is also increased if crack is mixed with other drugs or alcohol.

An overdose on cocaine/crack is more likely if they are injected.

Recognised consequences of cocaine overdose are:

- Restlessness
- Pressured speech
- Change in behaviour
- Sudden rise in body temperature - feeling very warm or having hot skin
- Flushed face
- Muscle cramps
- Stiffness in arms and legs
- Confusion
- Seizure
- Increased motor activity
- Hypertension – high blood pressure
- Tachycardia
- Irregular heart rhythm
- Stroke
- Heart attack
- Unresponsiveness

Health

Problems relating to acute cocaine intoxication are relatively common. Cocaine can cause a range of acute health-related problems and even sudden death.

Crack can create a significant number of physical and mental health problems for people.

Use is highly risky for anybody with high blood pressure or a heart condition. Even perfectly

healthy, young people can have a fit or heart attack after consuming too much cocaine.

Breathing difficulties/ damage to the lungs 'crack lung'

People who use crack can experience breathing issues which can be brought on or made worse by the fumes from homemade crack pipes or ammonia which is used in the production of crack. These toxins can cause lung damage.

Smoking crack can cause severe wheezing, a chronic cough or asthma like symptoms. Damage to the lungs from smoking crack is generally termed 'crack lung'. Crack cocaine inhaled directly causes inflammation to the small alveoli in the lungs that are responsible for getting oxygen into our bodies and removing carbon dioxide waste. Damage to these important lung constituents can cause symptoms similar to pneumonia such as chest pain, productive cough, shortness of breath, fever, coughing up blood and occasionally respiratory failure. These symptoms can be worsened due to the direct effect of cocaine on the small blood vessels supplying the lungs causing haemorrhaging there.

Tuberculosis (TB)

Crack users are more susceptible to other respiratory problems such as tuberculosis due to ongoing damage caused to the lung tissue. One study conducted in London found that crack cocaine users were significantly more likely than non-drug users to be smear positive on diagnosis for TB.

The authors stated that respiratory damage caused by crack use may predispose a person to infectivity. Those with HIV or a weakened immune system are also more susceptible to contracting other diseases such as TB. People using crack in properties or private dwellings with high levels of use are likely to have multiple risk factors for contracting TB.

Skin

People that use crack may experience skin problems. Some people might get itchy skin, rashes, eczema or experience a change in skin colour or grey pallor (blue or grey skin). People

also risk getting local burns on the thumbs and mouth.

Oral health

Cuts, blisters and sores on the lips and mouth are common among crack users. This can lead to the spread and transmission of diseases from sharing pipes.

Weight loss

People who use cocaine can lose weight if their health deteriorates. Cocaine is an appetite suppressant meaning people may feel less hungry when using it. Periods of prolonged crack use might see a person not eating for a number of days.

Blood-borne viruses

Sharing snorting, injecting and smoking equipment can increase the risk of getting blood-borne viruses such as hepatitis C and HIV.

People can access sterile injecting equipment and safer injecting advice from their local needle exchange. People can also enquire about sterile smoking equipment.

People that inject stimulant type drugs may need to inject more often and will therefore need to ensure that they access enough supplies from their needle exchange.

Cocaine/crack and pregnancy

Cocaine use during pregnancy is associated with maternal migraines and seizures, premature membrane rupture, and separation of the placental lining from the uterus prior to delivery.

Pregnancy is accompanied by normal cardiovascular changes, and cocaine use exacerbates these—sometimes leading to serious problems with high blood pressure (hypertensive crises), spontaneous miscarriage, preterm labour, and difficult delivery. Cocaine use can reduce the supply of oxygen to the baby through the placenta which can mean smaller babies at birth, possible abnormalities or still birth.

Crack-using pregnant women must receive appropriate medical and psychological care.

Mothers-to-be are advised not to use crack during pregnancy. It is important for crack-using pregnant women to get medical advice from a GP or their maternity team to discuss reduction or cessation. Suddenly stopping could cause possible side effects.

Mental health

Crack can cause marked changes in mood and behaviour. It can also exacerbate any underlying mental health problems.

Cocaine use has been linked to a variety of psychiatric symptoms with crack causing more frequent, intense symptoms including psychosis.

The short-term effects of crack can see people experiencing a short-lived psychosis that may include auditory hallucinations. Some people may experience suspiciousness or severe paranoia, which could last for hours, days or weeks following use. During this time people can become irrational and aggressive.

Following use, a person's mood could decline quickly. Some people find the come down or withdrawal period after use difficult and this has been described as a 'crash'. During a come down period people can experience anxiety, paranoia, hostility and depression to such an extent that they experience suicidal thoughts and behaviours.

Cocaine/crack and alcohol

When cocaine and alcohol are used together they combine in the body to produce cocaethylene which increases risk of damaging organs such as the liver and heart. Cocaethylene is more toxic than cocaine and alcohol alone and produces a greater increase in heart rates and blood pressure.

Cocaethylene prolongs the effects of cocaine and takes longer to leave the system than cocaine alone. When using both alcohol and cocaine in combination, people risk continuing to drink without realising how intoxicated they are.

Cocaethylene increases the risk of epilepsy, suicide, violence, accidents and sudden death. The latest drug-related death data shows that cocaine was recorded in 12 alcohol deaths in

Ireland in 2015.

Adulterants in crack

There is a risk of other substances or bulking agents appearing in crack.

Crack and cannabis use

Heavy cannabis use, particularly high content THC varieties such as 'skunk', may exacerbate the tendency of crack to produce paranoia and worsen mental health symptoms.

Dependence

Crack has potential to cause addiction. This is due to the long term changes that repeated use of cocaine can cause to the brain's reward system and other brain systems. The reward circuit eventually adapts to excess dopamine brought on by the drug.

Therefore, people take more frequent doses to achieve the same high but also to prevent the onset of unpleasant withdrawal symptoms such as depression, fatigue, increased appetite, insomnia and slowed thinking.

Drug-related debt

Due to the cost of cocaine, its short term effects, repetitive use and dependency, people can sometimes develop drug-related debts with suppliers. This could lead to drug related intimidation or violence.

Cocaine prevalence and trends

The latest Irish prevalence data from 2014/2015 shows that:

- Lifetime cocaine use has increased when compared to 2010/11 figures.
- The percentage of respondents aged 15-64 years who reported using cocaine (including crack) at some point in their lives increased from 7% to 8%.
- The proportion of young adults (15-34) who reported using cocaine in their lifetimes has also increased from 9% in 2010/11 to 11% in 2014/15.
- Similar to the previous studies, more men reported using cocaine in their lifetimes compared to women (11% vs. 5%).

Cocaine-related deaths in Ireland

The 2015 drug-related death index shows a 110% increase in cocaine-related deaths since 2010, from 21 to 44 in 2015.

Irish data shows an increase in cocaine-related deaths during Ireland's economic boom years and a decrease following the recessionary period. Following a decline in cocaine-related deaths from 2008-2012, figures began to rise again in 2013 with 32 deaths recorded.

An increase in drug-related deaths might indicate an increase in cocaine prevalence among the general population/specific cohorts, changes in the economy or fluctuations in the illicit drug market.

Almost all deaths (93%) where cocaine was implicated involved other drugs in 2015.

Non-poisoning deaths are deaths among people with a history of drug dependency or non-dependent abuse of drugs whether or not the use of the drug had a direct impact on the cause of death. The number of non-poisoning deaths decreased by 2%, from 355 in 2014 to 347 in 2015.

The main causes of non-poisoning deaths recorded were hanging (trauma) 83/24% and cardiac events (medical) 55/16%. Cannabis and cocaine were the most common drugs used by those who died as a result of hanging in 2015.

The National Drug Treatment Reporting System (NDTRS)

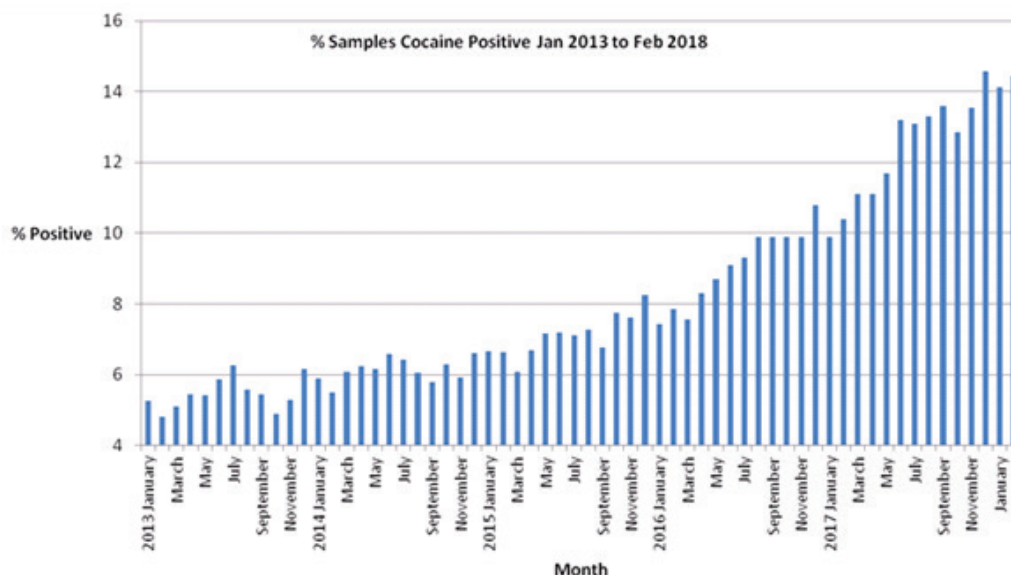
Cocaine remains the third most common drug reported among people presenting to treatment in Ireland. In 2015, 10.4% of cases reported problem cocaine use, the highest proportion since 2010.

National Drug Treatment Centre drug testing – monitoring trends among the addiction population

The number of positive samples for cocaine were high among the DTC clients during the years 2004-2009 but decreased between 2008-2012.

Since 2012, there has been a year-on-year increase in the number of DTC samples that test positive for cocaine. In June 2017, 13.2% of all samples tested positive for cocaine (all patients, including abstinence programmes).

Positive samples from the Dublin OST clinics in June 2017 averaged 17.6% with one clinic as high as 34%.



REDUCE THE HARMS

It is always safest not to take unknown or illicit drugs at all, if you do decide to use crack remember...

Avoid using homemade crack pipes made from plastic bottles and cans

Due to the high temperature required to smoke crack there is a risk that homemade pipes will break while smoking. There is also a risk of inhaling toxic fumes which are passed from homemade pipes when heated. These fumes can cause damage to lungs. Crack cocaine inhaled directly causes inflammation to the small alveoli in the lungs that are responsible for getting oxygen into our bodies and removing carbon dioxide waste. Talk to your local addiction service about approved pipes for smoking crack.

Use your own pipe and avoid sharing crack pipes

Sharing crack pipes can lead to the spread of blood-borne viruses such as hepatitis C and HIV.

Start with a test dose and try not to smoke the full rock

Smoke a small amount from the gauze, remove the flame and take a break. This will help you see how you react to the drug. There is a possibility that crack contains adulterants or other substances.

Don't use brillo pads on crack pipe as gauze

Using brillo pads on crack pipes can be dangerous. When heated they can cause burns to the lips, mouth, throat and damage to lungs.

Inhale the smoke from the pipe slowly

Try to not hold the smoke in your lungs for a long time.

Leave time between each pipe during the same session

It is important to leave time between pipes to check in with how you are feeling. The pipe will get hot, give it some time to cool down before re-using.

Mind your hands

Hold the pipe midway and not close to the top. Some people will burn their hands, it is important to look after these burns properly and not ignore them. Put ointment on cuts and burns to help them heal.

Look after your lips

Smoking crack can lead to blisters, sores or cuts on the lips or on the inside of the mouth. Because cocaine is an anaesthetic, people might not feel if they burn or cut themselves. People should always check their lips in the mirror after they use to look for cuts, blisters or sores that they might not have felt while smoking. Lip balm can help with chapped or cut lips. Remember that cuts on the inside or outside of lips can lead to the spread of blood borne viruses if pipes are shared.

If injecting crack:

There is a higher risk of overdose if crack is injected. As well as overdose, there is also the risk of damaging veins or the injecting site.

Cocaine acts like a local anaesthetic which can make the area around the injecting site numb. This can make it harder to find a vein and could increase the risk of damaging the injecting site.

Ask for extra needles, swabs and water

If injecting crack, ask for extra paraphernalia in case you use more than intended.

Always carry condoms

Stimulant drugs like crack can increase some people's sex drive.

Additional Harm Reduction Information

Some people can experience a bad crash or comedown and feel low after using crack. If this feeling does not pass then get support for yourself. This low feeling could lead to suicidal thoughts for some people.

If your friends are using crack, be aware of these risks and support them to access appropriate mental health or emergency services if necessary.

If you feel suicidal, try to get yourself to where you consider a safe place, contact a local doctor, the Accident and Emergency department of your nearest hospital or call 112.

Seek medical help if needed and be honest with emergency services about what you think was taken.

If you are concerned about a substance that you or a friend have taken:

- Don't take any more
- Don't take other drugs
- Put the person in the recovery position (if you know how)
- Call 112
- Stay with the person and don't leave the person alone

Concerned about your crack use?

Take the DUDIT Online Self-Assessment tool to identify the impact of your use.

Search for a local support service through the Drugs.ie National Directory of Drug and Alcohol Services drugs.ie/services

Talk to a local addiction service to find out where you can source sterile paraphernalia for using crack.

For information and support on drugs and alcohol visit [Drugs.ie](https://drugs.ie)

The HSE Drugs & Alcohol Helpline can be reached on 1800 459 459
Monday – Friday 9:30 – 5:30

