

# COCAINE

■ **Overview:** Cocaine is almost two drugs in one, blending stimulant and anesthetic effects in a single molecule. Derived from the leaves of the coca bush (*Erythroxylum coca*), which grows in Bolivia and Peru, powder cocaine is sniffed, injected, or converted into smoke-



able forms of the drug, called *crack* and *freebase*. The introduction of crack, which triggers an intense, brief high, caused cocaine use (and related problems) to surge during the 1980's and '90s.

■ **Street Names:** Blow, caine, coke, cola, freeze, snow (powder); base, rock (crack).

■ **Actions/Effects:** Cocaine is absorbed into the bloodstream through the mucous membranes of the nose, when sniffed; via the alveoli in the lungs, when smoked. In the brain, it pumps up the volume by increasing the activity of two main neurotransmitters, *norepinephrine* and *dopamine*. At low doses, its effects include feelings of excitement and alertness, combined with decreased appetite and fatigue. Physical effects include dilated pupils, constricted blood vessels, and elevated heart rate, respiration, and blood pressure. Higher doses (or use over a long period of time) can cause anxiety, paranoia, and toxic psychosis.



■ **Duration:** Depends on dose and mode of administration; typically 5-30 minutes, but can be (and often is) extended by repeat dosing.

■ **Medical Uses:** Once commonly used as a local anesthetic and as a treatment for depression, cocaine has been replaced almost entirely by less-toxic drugs. Today, it's used only as a topical anesthetic in the respiratory tract.

■ **Risks/Side Effects:** Cocaine's rush quickly fades, which adds to the risk of continuous use and toxic effects. Overdose can develop so quickly (regardless of how the drug is used) that users can die before help arrives. Overdose symptoms include delirium; rapid, irregular, shallow breathing; unconsciousness; and cardiac arrest.



*Crack-pak. Crack is usually sold in small vials or plastic bags.*

■ **Trends:** Cocaine use was limited for most of the 20th Century, but exploded during the 1970's as the supply of other stimulant drugs declined. Prior to that time, cocaine was considered fairly harmless, due to its rarity and high price. Problems skyrocketed with the appearance of freebase and crack in the 1980's.

■ **Demographics:** Cocaine use has dropped since the peak years of the '80s, but has started inching back up. The number of Americans admitting past-month use stood at 2,397,000 in 2005, down from 5,686,000 in 1985, according to one national survey, but still more than 18 percent above 2002 totals.



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