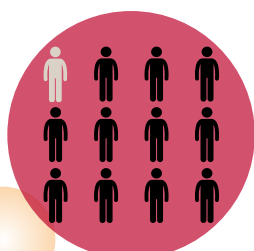


# Substances At A Glance: Cocaine & Crack

*In 2019, cocaine was also the most commonly used illegal drug, accounting for approximately half (49%) of illegal drug use overall.<sup>1</sup>*



**What is cocaine?** Cocaine is a powerful stimulant made from the leaves of the coca plant. The purified chemical, cocaine hydrochloride, was isolated a century ago and used medically to block pain until it was found to be a powerfully addictive substance. Cocaine is typically crushed into powder and inhaled. The powder can also be processed chemically to produce “crack,” a less expensive version that can be either smoked, dissolved, or injected.



**Cocaine use among youth:** In 2022, 1.6%<sup>2</sup> of youth in grades 7-12 reported using cocaine in the past 12 months. The rate was over twice as high (4.2%) among post-secondary age students in Canada.<sup>3</sup>



**Why do young people use cocaine?** Cocaine is a stimulant, meaning that it can increase energy levels and alertness. It causes a massive release of dopamine through the brain, which can trigger feelings of intense euphoria, excitement and pleasure. Young people may choose to use cocaine to feel more upbeat or to cope with depression or stressful situations, even though long-term cocaine use can actually cause or worsen symptoms of depression.



**Short and long-term effects:** Cocaine can produce euphoria (“high”) and can make a person feel mentally alert, energetic and talkative. A person using cocaine may also feel agitated and nervous. When the high wears off, the person may feel anxious or depressed and have intense cravings for the drug. Some people stay high by using the drug for hours or days. Cocaine use can cause paranoia, muscle spasms, fainting, chest pain and coma. Long term use can cause sleeplessness, depression, damage to the nasal passages, throat & lungs, kidney failure, bowel perforation/decay, sexual impotence and hallucinations.<sup>4</sup>



**Cocaine and the law:** Cocaine is illegal in Canada, as it is a substance that falls under Schedule I of the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act. Sale, possession or production of cocaine is illegal. Cocaine possession can result in seven years’ imprisonment, while trafficking and production of the drug can result in life imprisonment.



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Total legal costs associated with cocaine totaled \$2.41 billion in 2020, making cocaine the second highest substance-attributable criminal justice cost in Canada after alcohol.<sup>5</sup>



**What are the risks of cocaine use?** Cocaine overdose can be fatal, causing abnormal heartbeat, stroke, seizures, or respiratory arrest. Cocaine is a highly addictive substance; withdrawal can cause exhaustion, extended and restless sleep or sleeplessness, hunger, irritability,<sup>4</sup> depression, suicidal thoughts and intense cravings for more of the drug.<sup>4</sup> Use during pregnancy can cause miscarriage, premature birth, and low birth weight in infants, as well as neonatal abstinence syndrome.



**How can someone reduce the risks of cocaine use?** Never mix cocaine with other substances, including alcohol, cannabis, or opioids; doing so can increase the risk of overdose. Avoid using cocaine from untrusted sources, and never use while alone. If someone begins to experience symptoms of addiction-like cravings, or cocaine withdrawal symptoms such as issues with eating, sleeping, depression, violent outbursts, or especially suicidal ideations, they should speak with their doctor or healthcare provider as soon as possible.



**How can I help my kids understand the risks of cocaine?** Having open and meaningful conversations about the use of cocaine, crack, and other substances on a regular basis with your child is crucial to keeping them healthy and safe. Ask them open ended questions to find out what your child knows about cocaine. Discuss with them the short- and long-term effects, the risks, and the importance of making safe decisions. Most importantly, always offer empathy and support to ensure that they feel safe, even if you learn or suspect that your child is using cocaine. Encourage them to reach out to you for support if they ever need it.



**There is no antidote for a cocaine overdose, which resulted in 1662 deaths in Canada in 2020.<sup>5</sup>** Help your child understand that if they or someone they know is experiencing a cocaine overdose, they need to contact emergency services immediately.

Someone who uses cocaine may not call emergency medical services in the event of an overdose for fear they could get into legal trouble. The *Good Samaritan Drug Overdose Act* offers some legal protection to anyone seeking emergency support during an overdose, including the person experiencing the overdose and anyone else on the scene. The Act can protect from charges of possession of a controlled substance.

## Reference List

1. Government of Canada, 2020. [Canadian Alcohol and Drugs Survey 2019](#).
2. Government of Canada, 2023. [Canadian Student Tobacco Alcohol and Drug Use Survey 2021-2022](#).
3. Government of Canada, 2024. [Canadian Post-Secondary Education Alcohol & Drug Use Survey 2021-2022](#).
4. Government of Canada, 2023. [Cocaine and Crack](#).
5. Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addictions, 2023. [Canadian Substance Use Costs and Harms](#).