

COCAINE

Cocaine is an illegal stimulant street drug made from coca plant leaves, and it is extremely addictive. Cocaine is usually snorted, but it can also be injected (when dissolved in water), rubbed into the gums, or smoked (the smokable form of cocaine is known as crack).

Cocaine acts on the pleasure centers of a user’s brain, increasing the release of dopamine (a neurotransmitter connected to the brain’s reward centers) and giving users a strong, almost immediate high. But a cocaine high does not last very long (about fifteen to thirty minutes when snorted, or five to ten minutes when smoked). Because a cocaine high is so short-lived, it lends itself very easily to addiction and abuse. The initial rush is exhilarating, but ephemeral. After the feelings of euphoria fade, a user may want to recapture that feeling—but cocaine tolerances build very quickly, and a user must use increasingly high amounts of cocaine to preserve and maintain their high.

Both short-term and long-term cocaine use cause damages to the body and brain. Although a cocaine high generally causes feelings of happiness, energy, and mental acuity, it can also make a person irritable, paranoid, aggressive, and/or violent. Some people describe cocaine as making them feel “invincible,” as if nothing can harm them or negatively affect them in any way. Therein lies both the appeal and the extreme danger of cocaine use. By increasing the brain’s expectation of reward, cocaine also makes its users selfish and ego-driven. Someone who feels “invincible” is unlikely to have qualms about harming another person, whether emotionally or psychologically.

Long-term cocaine use also does significant damage to the body. These damages can include movement problems (including Parkinson’s disease), becoming malnourished (as a stimulant, cocaine decreases appetite, thereby causing many cocaine abusers to lose an unhealthy amount of weight), and even paranoid, auditory hallucinations. When snorted, long-term cocaine use can cause nosebleeds, the loss of a sense of smell (due to nasal membrane damage or damage to the olfactory nerve) and/or taste (because a sense of taste requires a sense of smell), sneezing, congestion, and problems swallowing. When injected, cocaine increases the risk of contracting blood borne diseases like HIV or hepatitis C. When rubbed on the gums, long-term cocaine use can lead to severe bowel decay (known as bowel gangrene, an abdominal complication that can be fatal if left untreated), due to the body’s reduced blood flow, as blood flow to the internal organs can become blocked.

Cocaine withdrawal can be very intense and painful, and can begin as soon as an hour and a half after the last dose. Although people may not immediately associate cocaine with dangerous withdrawals—as opposed to withdrawals from substances like alcohol, benzodiazepines, or opioids—cocaine withdrawal can still be very serious. While withdrawals from many drugs include physical symptoms, cocaine withdrawal symptoms are primarily psychological—but can still be incredibly harmful.

When the brain’s reward circuit becomes accustomed to frequent cocaine use, it changes the brain’s expectation of pleasure and reward. Once cocaine is no longer in a person’s system, the brain must adjust to lower levels of dopamine—and lower chemical expectations of reward. Understandably, detoxifying this drug from the body will be an unpleasant process. Depression is a common cocaine withdrawal symptom, as dopamine levels are reduced. This depression is often accompanied by weariness and fatigue, not to mention an inability to feel sexual arousal, and anhedonia—the inability to experience pleasurable sensations. It affects a person’s ability to take pleasure in things they used to enjoy doing. Cocaine withdrawal also includes a highly increased risk of suicide, and in some withdrawal cases—particularly if the patient has co-occurring disorders, a history of depression, self-harm, or suicidal ideation or attempts—it is recommended that the patient’s withdrawal be monitored at a detoxification facility, like Soul Surgery.

Cocaine withdrawal also causes slowed thinking and movement, and a difficulty concentrating. When your brain has gotten used to the intense focus of cocaine use, as it adjusts to detoxification, the mind has trouble focusing on tasks. Increased appetite (due to cocaine’s suppression of appetite), nightmares, and insomnia are also common withdrawal symptoms; common physical symptoms include muscle aches, nerve pain, tremors, and chills. More serious physical symptoms can lead to high blood pressure, heart damage, or even a heart attack.

But those in recovery don’t have to undergo these painful transitions alone. Fortunately, there are methods to cope with cocaine addiction and cocaine withdrawal, through treatments offered at Soul Surgery in Scottsdale, Arizona. Soul Surgery offers cognitive-behavioral therapy in a strong, therapeutic community, supported by a licensed professional medical team trained in substance abuse. Through a full-package approach with counseling, therapy, medication-assisted treatment if necessary, and many other services offered through Soul Surgery’s fully licensed Intensive Outpatient Programs (IOP), Partial Hospitalization Programs (PHP) and Outpatient (OP) programs, those experiencing withdrawal from cocaine, or other drugs, can receive the help they need at Soul Surgery.