Cocaine and crack cocaine: a patient education guide

Plain-language information for a conversation with a qualified clinician.

General health education - no patient data
Not a diagnosis. Discuss your situation with a qualified clinician.

Start here

People use cocaine for different reasons, and not everyone who uses cocaine has cocaine use disorder. This guide offers calm, plain-language information to help you decide what questions to bring to a clinician.

Powder cocaine and crack cocaine are different forms of the same stimulant drug. Effects can include increased alertness, heart rate and blood pressure. Illicit products may contain unexpected substances, and mixing substances can increase risk.

This guide does not diagnose, prescribe, determine eligibility or replace urgent medical assessment.

When to get urgent help

Call 911 for chest pain, trouble breathing, seizure, collapse, severe confusion, severe agitation, signs of stroke, very high body temperature or an immediate risk of harm.

If someone may have been poisoned, contact the Ontario Poison Centre at 1-800-268-9017. For non-emergency health advice in Ontario, call Health811 at 811. If you are thinking about suicide or cannot stay safe, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency department.

Possible effects on health

- Heart and circulation: increased heart rate or blood pressure, irregular rhythm and heart attack risk.
- Brain and nervous system: seizure, stroke, severe agitation, paranoia or psychosis.
- Mood and sleep: anxiety, irritability, disrupted sleep, low mood and cravings after effects wear off.
- Nose, mouth and lungs: nasal irritation or bleeding, dental injury, cough and breathing problems.
- Infection and blood-borne illness: shared equipment can increase HIV and hepatitis C risk; confidential testing and harm-reduction support are available.
- Pregnancy and sexual health: a confidential clinician conversation can help identify support that fits your circumstances.

Patterns worth discussing

Possible signs include using more than intended, difficulty cutting down, strong cravings, spending substantial time obtaining or recovering, continued use despite consequences, and important activities becoming less important than cocaine.

One or more experiences does not confirm a diagnosis. A qualified clinician can help you understand what is happening without judgment.

Try asking: Can we talk about my cocaine use without judgment and decide on one safe next step?

Crash, withdrawal and mixing

Fatigue, low mood, increased or disrupted sleep, increased appetite, irritability, anxiety, strong cravings and difficulty concentrating can occur after use. Timing varies; there is no single safe timeline for everyone.

Mixing cocaine with alcohol may increase health risks. Combining stimulants with opioids or sedating substances can make an overdose harder to recognize. Naloxone does not reverse stimulant toxicity, but it may help if opioids are also involved.

> Do not attempt unsupervised detox. Seek urgent advice for severe symptoms, suicidal thoughts, psychosis, chest pain, seizures, pregnancy, major medical conditions or use of multiple substances.

Treatment and recovery

Support can include primary care, addiction medicine, counselling, cognitive behavioural therapy, motivational interviewing, peer or family support, withdrawal management, residential or community programs and harm-reduction services.

There is no one-size-fits-all treatment. Medication decisions require clinician assessment; do not self-start medication or rely on this guide for a dose.

- Learn and talk
- Reduce immediate risks
- Connect with a clinician or support service
- Choose a treatment goal
- Continue follow-up and recovery support

Bring to a visit

- Current medication list, including doses and supplements
- Prescription and non-prescription substances, allergies and previous side effects
- Approximate timeline of cocaine or other substance use, if comfortable sharing
- Symptoms and when they began
- Home blood-pressure readings, if requested
- Previous hospital or treatment documents, if relevant

- Questions you want answered and your health card, if requested

Do not upload private health information to this public website.

Sources and review record

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Government of Canada
Substance-use support and harm reduction information.
https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/substance-use/get-help-with-substance-use.html

CAMH
Cocaine and crack cocaine health information, Ontario.
https://www.camh.ca/en/health-info/mental-illness-and-addiction-index/cocaine

CCSA
Canadian cocaine information and 2019 estimates.
https://www.ccsa.ca/cocaine

Ontario Poison Centre
Poison information and emergency guidance.
https://www.ontariopoisoncentre.ca/

Ontario Health811
Non-emergency health navigation in Ontario.
https://www.ontario.ca/page/health811-online-health-care-information

Physician review checkpoint: emergency wording, withdrawal and harm-reduction language, treatment descriptions, local service details, coverage classifications and this PDF must be reviewed before publication. This resource does not imply endorsement by Albany Medical Clinic or any service listed.