

Cocaine Misuse

Understanding the signs, risks and where to get help

Cocaine is a powerful stimulant. It can produce short-lived feelings of energy, confidence, alertness or euphoria, but those effects can be followed by a marked drop in mood and energy. Misuse can develop around social situations, work pressure, confidence, staying awake, emotional escape or an increasingly automatic pattern of craving and repetition. A person does not need to use every day for cocaine to be causing harm.

Signs the pattern may be becoming difficult

Things to notice include using more than intended; strong urges or preoccupation with the next opportunity to use; repeated unsuccessful attempts to cut down; spending increasing time obtaining, using or recovering; secrecy; financial problems; missed responsibilities; disrupted sleep; irritability; anxiety; low mood after use; relationship conflict; continuing despite health problems; or needing cocaine to feel confident, sociable, productive or 'normal'. Binge patterns can be particularly difficult because repeated doses may continue long after the person intended to stop.

The stimulant - crash - craving cycle

Before Stress, social pressure, tiredness, confidence worries, difficult feelings or learned cues can trigger an urge.	During Stimulation and reward can temporarily increase energy, confidence and alertness while reducing appetite and sleep.
After A crash can involve exhaustion, low mood, irritability, anxiety, disturbed sleep and strong cravings.	Repetition Using again to escape the crash or restore the desired feeling can strengthen the cycle.

Physical and psychological risks

Cocaine can raise heart rate and blood pressure and place strain on the cardiovascular system. Serious complications can include abnormal heart rhythms, heart attack, stroke, seizures and overheating. Psychological effects can include anxiety, panic, agitation, suspiciousness or paranoia. Repeated use may worsen sleep, mood, concentration and emotional regulation. Mixing substances adds uncertainty and risk. Cocaine and alcohol together form cocaethylene in the body, which is associated with additional cardiovascular toxicity.

Urgent warning signs

Call 999 for severe chest pain, collapse or loss of consciousness, seizure, severe breathing difficulty, signs of stroke, extreme overheating, severe confusion/agitation, or if someone is in immediate danger. Do not assume that a young or otherwise healthy person cannot have a serious cocaine-related emergency.

Beginning change

A useful first step is to map the pattern rather than relying on willpower alone. Note the people, places, feelings, times and situations linked with use; what cocaine appears to provide in that moment; and what the cost is afterwards. Reducing access to money or contacts, changing routines linked with use, planning for high-risk social situations and involving a trusted person or professional can all create space between an urge and an action. If low mood, anxiety, trauma, ADHD symptoms, loneliness or work pressure are part of the pattern, those needs deserve attention alongside the substance use.

Cocaine Misuse - Help, Support and Recovery

Practical next steps, support for loved ones and UK routes to help

Where to get help in the UK

GP	A GP can discuss physical and mental health concerns, assess symptoms and help you access local drug and alcohol services.
Local drug & alcohol service	Community services are available across the UK. Many accept self-referrals and offer confidential assessment, one-to-one work, groups and support with related difficulties.
FRANK	Confidential UK drug information and advice. Helpline: 0300 123 6600 ; text 82111 . FRANK also provides information about finding local support.
UK SMART Recovery	Free peer-support meetings using practical tools for motivation, managing urges, problem-solving and maintaining change. Online and face-to-face options are available.
Narcotics Anonymous UK	Peer-led recovery meetings around the UK and online. Helpline: 0300 999 1212 .
Samaritans	For emotional support at any time, call 116 123 . In an immediate medical or safety emergency, call 999.

A practical pattern-mapping exercise

Write down four headings: **Trigger - What I wanted - What happened - What could help next time**. Under 'Trigger', include the situation and feeling, not only the place. Under 'What I wanted', identify the function: energy, confidence, belonging, escape, focus, excitement or relief. Then record both the immediate and next-day consequences. Finally, identify one alternative action that is realistic enough to use in the same situation. The aim is not to create a perfect plan; it is to make an automatic cycle more visible.

Supporting somebody else

Choose a time when the person is not intoxicated or in the middle of a crash. Use observations rather than accusations: 'I've noticed you're not sleeping and you're spending more money after nights out.' Ask what they think is happening and what they would like to change. Encourage professional support and keep clear boundaries around money, driving, aggression, children and your own safety. You can care about someone without financing, covering up or taking responsibility for their substance use.

One book to explore

***Overcoming Your Alcohol or Drug Problem: Effective Recovery Strategies* - Dennis C. Daley and G. Alan Marlatt.** This is not a cocaine-only book, but its practical approach makes it useful for understanding stimulant misuse. I particularly value the focus on triggers, cravings, decision-making and relapse prevention rather than treating recovery as a single act of willpower. The exercises can help a reader examine what keeps a pattern going and begin building alternative responses. It is best used alongside appropriate professional or peer support when cocaine use is causing significant harm.

A message from Maggie

Cocaine can become tied to confidence, energy, social connection, productivity or escape, which means change may involve more than simply removing the drug. Understanding what you are reaching for matters. If you are worried about your use, you do not need to wait until everything has fallen apart before seeking help. A conversation with a GP, drug service, trusted person or recovery group can be a meaningful first step. Recovery can begin before you feel completely ready.

Clinical note

This guide is educational and does not replace individual medical assessment or treatment. Seek urgent medical help for serious symptoms. Contact details and service provision can change, so current information should be checked before publication. Particular care is needed where cocaine is used with alcohol, opioids, other stimulants or prescribed medicines, or where significant physical or mental-health symptoms are present.