

Guidelines for Healthcare Providers Regarding Client Cocaine and Crack Use

Cocaine (also known as blow, C, coke, flake, powder or rock) is an illegal, highly addictive stimulant drug that affects the central nervous system. It is a white, odourless powder that comes from the leaves of the plant, *coca bush*. Crack is made by dissolving cocaine and boiling it with other ingredients until it forms lumps (or rocks). When the rocks are heated, they make a crackling sound. This is where the name “crack” comes from.

Here is information that could support client safety and reduce client risk:

Be aware of signs that a person is “using”

Short-Term Effects

Cocaine/crack is unpredictable and affects everyone differently. After using cocaine/crack, a person may experience: *Rapid breathing, dilated pupils, tremors, muscle twitching, mood swings, trouble sleeping, dry mouth, red and chapped nose, calmness, anxiety, vomiting and/or cold sweats.*

Users may experience strong cravings for cocaine/crack after the effects of the drug have worn off. This can lead to feelings of anxiety or depression. Often users will look to extend the satisfying effects and avoid withdrawal symptoms by using the drug for hours or days at a time; this is known as bingeing.

According to the Center for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH), smoking crack, “with its rapid, intense and short-lived effects, is the most addictive”¹ method of taking cocaine.

Know the risks of long term use

- **Heart problems:** such as high blood pressure and a fast or irregular heartbeat.
- **Psychosis:** including hallucinations, delusions, becoming psychotic or experiencing feelings of paranoia.

There is no safe way to use cocaine/crack, so the best way to avoid these risks is to not use any at all.

- **Breathing problems:** which could include a condition known as “crack lung”. Users may experience symptoms like difficulty breathing, chest pain or pulmonary injuries.
- **Birth defects:** if used by pregnant women, risk increases regarding miscarriage, premature birth, reduced fetal weight and fetal malformation.
- **Impotence:** males could experience problems performing sexually.

Communicate the risks of use

- **Always use one’s own pipe:** A small amount of blood can carry Hepatitis C. Crack users have a higher risk of contracting diseases like HIV, Hepatitis C, sexually transmitted infections, and tuberculosis. Users should avoid sharing even if they and the person they want to share with have one of these health conditions.
- **Use a pyrex pipe:** Pipes made of plastic, worn or thin glass, cans or copper add to the dangers of smoking crack. Pipes for smoking crack/cocaine can be poorly constructed, they can be hot, and have rough surfaces. This can cause injuries to the mouth and hands, including oral irritation, cuts or burns.
- **Mouthpiece:** If your client is going to share a pipe, it’s best for each person to use their own rubber mouthpiece. Attach a plastic/rubber mouthpiece to the end of the pipe to prevent burns. A mouthpiece can be made using rubber bands, tape or cardboard.

- **Use pipe screens:** Using steel wool as a screen can damage a person's lungs and expose them to dangerous toxins. Pieces of steel wool can break off and cause burns on the lips and mouth.
- **Avoid driving under the influence of cocaine/crack:** Users can suffer attacks of paranoia, hallucinations or mood swings while driving. Drug use can make the user feel invincible. They may lose concentration, increasing the risk of collision and injury.
- **Avoid alcohol and other drugs:** Combining crack/cocaine with other illicit drugs or alcohol can be harmful.
- **Take breaks and limit one's use:** Waiting 30-60 minutes before repeated usage and waiting a few days or weeks between drug binges gives the body and brain a chance to rest. Taking breaks also helps to soften and shorten the 'burnout' that follows a binge.

Inform your client of safe disposal practices

After a crack pipe is considered no longer safe, safe disposal options can help prevent the transmission of disease and reduce harm. A sharps disposal container ideally should be:

- made of a heavy-duty plastic;
- able to close with a tight-fitting, puncture-proof lid;
- upright and stable during disposal; and

- leak-resistant and properly labeled.

The Canadian AIDS Treatment Information Exchange is Canada's source for information about HIV and Hepatitis C. This website provides people with the knowledge, resources and expertise to reduce transmission and improve quality of life to at-risk communities, health care providers and community organizations.

Recovery from Cocaine/Crack Use

If your client wants to quit using crack, they can expect to go through withdrawal symptoms.

Phases of withdrawal

The symptoms of withdrawal will start between 1-2 days after your client last used the drug; this could last for about 10 weeks. The most difficult time may be between the 4th and 7th day. Here are the stages of withdrawal:

1. **Crash** – your client may feel lonely, depressed, anxious, very hungry, tired and restless. During this time, withdrawal is so intense and the craving so high that it can be difficult to think clearly or reason logically.
2. **Withdrawal** – your client may have a lack of energy, show anger, and have trouble feeling happy. This can last for up to 10 weeks. The body is trying to repair itself from the damage caused by the drug and to balance out moods and emotions.

3. **Extinction** – your client may have ongoing cravings for cocaine/crack and **need a plan to help him/her stay clean.** Treatment and having people around who can give support is important.

Who can you contact if you need help regarding drug use?

If you or your client requires more information, please contact your local Addictions/Mental Health Services office or doctor. To locate Addictions/Mental Health Services near you here are some options:

- visit www.saskatchewan.ca/addictions
- check the green pages of your phone book for your local health region's services;
- visit HealthLine Online at healthlineonline.ca; or
- contact HealthLine at 811 and ask to speak to an Addictions or Mental Health Counsellor.

NOTE: This material is for information only and should not replace information from an Addictions or Mental Health Counsellor, doctor or other health care provider.



To access fact sheets sources please contact the Saskatchewan Ministry of Health at (306) 787-7239.

¹ Center for Addictions and Mental Health (CAMH) (2003). Do you know... Cocaine. Retrieved from: http://knowledgex.camh.net/amhspecialists/resources_families/Pages/cocaine_dyk.aspx. Accessed Oct. 2014