

crack



What is crack?

Crack is a crystal form of cocaine that can be smoked. Smoking the drug sends it to the brain very quickly, and gives more of a “rush” than snorting it. The high from crack lasts about five to 10 minutes.

Why do people use crack?

People use crack, or any mood-altering drug, to change the way they feel. Crack can numb bad feelings and make people feel better—for a while. The more often people use crack, the more they crave it, and the harder it is to control their use.

Is crack addictive?

Yes! Crack can be very addictive, even with short-term use. You may be addicted to crack if you:

- have built up a tolerance to it (you don't get the same high that you used to get)
- keep thinking about the next time you'll get to use it again
- spend so much time and money getting crack that you don't take care of important things in your life, such as school, work or family
- keep using crack despite the problems it causes in your life.

The good news is that people can and do stop using crack. Even people who are not ready to give up crack can learn ways to use it more safely, and to plan for the day when they are ready to give it up.

I've used crack and nothing bad happened to me. Does this mean I can handle it?

Using crack is a gamble. The more you use, the greater the risk—but even taking the same or smaller amounts than you've used in the past can have bad effects.

- Using crack can lead to a stroke, heart attack or seizures, even in healthy people.
- Using crack can make people paranoid, angry and aggressive; some people hallucinate or become delusional. These effects generally go away when they stop using crack.
- Crack may be contaminated. Levamisole is a drug that may be present in crack (and powder cocaine) but there is no way to tell. Levamisole affects people differently but may cause serious health problems such as infections (fever, chills) or black patches on your skin.

What happens when people stop using crack?

After using crack, people come down or “crash.” The crash makes the world seem grey and sad. People feel grouchy, edgy and exhausted. They sleep for a long time and wake up very hungry. Using crack changes the brain. When people use it often and over a long time, and then stop using, strong cravings make them want to use again. These cravings may continue for a long time after they stop using.

I want to quit using crack, or at least take a break. What can I do?

The first few hours or days after you stop using can be hard to get through, but if you fight the cravings—and keep off the drug—you’ll soon start to feel better. The cravings to use may be strong at first, but will fade with time.

The following strategies can help you to get off crack:

- Find out what treatment programs are available.
- Attend a self-help group to get support and meet others in recovery.
- Stay clear of all other drugs, including alcohol.
- Book into a detox centre for a few days.
- Don’t carry money or bank cards.
- Stay away from people who use drugs and places you associate with using.
- Build your strength through healthy eating, sleeping and exercise.
- Keep busy with work, school and other activities that don’t include substance use.
- Tell your friends and family you are not using, and ask for their support.

I’m going to keep using crack. What can I do to be safer?

Use a pyrex pipe. Pipes made of thin glass, plastic, cans or copper add to the dangers of smoking crack. Pyrex pipes are available from harm reduction services.

Use a hash pipe screen. Using cigarette ash or Brillo as a screen can damage your lungs, and expose you to dangerous toxins.

Always use your own pipe. Even a speck of blood can carry hepatitis C, which can live outside the body for a long time. People can catch more than one strain of hepatitis C, so avoid sharing even if you and the person you want to share with are both hepatitis C positive.

Protect your lips. Avoid burns by wrapping the end of your pipe with a thick rubber band or a rolled up cardboard matchbook. Help your lips to heal by using lip protector.

Avoid alcohol and other drugs. Combining crack with other drugs increases the risks to your health.

Take breaks and limit your use. Wait 30 minutes or more when you’re using, and a few days or weeks between runs, to give your body and brain a rest. Taking breaks, and using for shorter periods, also helps to soften and shorten the crash that follows a run.

Remember to eat, drink and sleep. Eat before you use. Sip water while you’re using. Give your body a chance to rest.

Pay the rent and bills and buy food first. It’s hard to budget your money while you are on a crack run.

Carry condoms. Crack can increase people’s desire for sex, or lead people to exchange sex for money for drugs. Be prepared.

Connect with a harm reduction program. Ask your community health centre or public health office if there is one close by.

Get help immediately if you feel down or depressed after using and think you might harm yourself.

Is smoking crack safer than injecting?

Smoking crack and injecting powder cocaine lead to immediate and intense effects, so both are dangerous for addiction and overdose. Smoking may be safer since injecting can damage veins, cause abscesses and increase the risk of catching HIV, hepatitis and other serious infections. If you inject:

- don't share needles—or any works—with others
- rotate injection sites
- avoid the neck, breasts, fingers, feet, groin and penis
- get more information on safe injection from a harm reduction program or community health centre.

Is there help?

Yes!

Of the many kinds of services available, there's one that's right for you. Harm reduction services can help you to be safer while you're using. Group or individual counselling or a stay at a drug treatment centre can help you to cut down or get off crack completely.

Even if treatment hasn't worked for you in the past, it's worth trying again. Some people try treatment several times before it works, and many need long-term support to stay drug-free. To prevent relapse, avoid all other mood-altering drugs (including alcohol), and continue to meet with your group or counsellor for support, for as long as you need it. For more information, see your doctor or contact one of the agencies listed below.

Where can I get more help with drugs?

ConnexOntario Drug and Alcohol Helpline:
1 800 565-8603

Access CAMH: Call 416 535-8501
and select option 2

MAARS (Metro Addiction Assessment Referral Service):
416 599-1448 (in Toronto)

The Works: 416 392-0520
(a harm reduction service in Toronto)

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