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What is cocaine?

Cocaine is a colourless substance obtained from the leaves of certain types of coca plant. There are basically two chemical forms of cocaine:

- Cocaine powder is a white crystalline powder (hydrochloride salt) and is the most commonly used form. Drug dealers often dilute cocaine powder with other substances, such as talcum powder or sugar (lactose), or local anaesthetic (lignocaine). It is usually inhaled through a thin straw, or dissolved in water and injected.
- Crack cocaine is an off-white solid substance made by dissolving cocaine powder in a mixture of water and baking soda; this mixture is boiled, dried and broken into rock-like chunks. It can be smoked, or dissolved in an acidic liquid and injected.¹

What does cocaine do?

The effects of cocaine occur very rapidly and include raised blood pressure, increased body temperature, stimulation, reduction in hunger and thirst, dilation of pupils and feelings of great energy and alertness. Repeated sniffing of cocaine powder irritates the nose and can cause a breakdown of nasal cartilage.¹ Cocaine is one of the most psychologically addictive drugs.

How do we know how many people use cocaine in Ireland?

Every four years the [National Advisory Committee on Drugs and Alcohol](#) (NACDA) and the Northern Ireland Public Health Information and Research Branch (PHIRB) commission a survey of the general population to estimate the number of people in Ireland who use drugs and alcohol. Face-to-face interviews take place with respondents aged 15–64 normally resident in households in Ireland and Northern Ireland. This type of survey is not designed to include people who do not normally live in private households (such as prisoners or hostel dwellers).

How many people use cocaine in Ireland?

The latest survey involved 7,669 people (5,134 in Ireland and 2,535 in Northern Ireland).

Estimates show a rise in the percentage of cocaine users in the general population aged 15–64:

- 2002/3 survey – 3.0%
- 2006/7 survey – 5.3%
- 2010/11 survey – 6.8%

A special analysis of cocaine results was published in 2014.² The results for Ireland, which had 5,126 valid responses, showed that:

- 6.8% of the adult population (aged 15–64) had tried **cocaine** at least once (ever used).
- 1.5% had used it in the last 12 months (recent use).
- 0.5% had used it in the last month (current use).
- 9.9% of men and 3.8% of women had used it.
- The median age at first use was 21 years.
- 95.5% of current cocaine powder users reported using cocaine 1-3 days in the month prior to the survey, the remainder 4.5% used the drug 4–9 days in that month.
- 95% of current cocaine powder users reported 'snorting' the drug, the remainder 5% reported smoking cocaine.
- 0.6% of the adult population (aged 15–64) had tried **crack cocaine** at least once (ever used).
- 1.0% of men and 0.2% of women had used it.
- The median age at first use was 23 years.

It is estimated that about 14.1 million Europeans (4.2% of the population aged 15–64 years) have used cocaine at least once in their life. In the last year it is estimated that 3.1 million (0.9%) of adults (15–64) and 2.2 million (1.7%) of young adults (15–34) used cocaine.³

How many people receive treatment for cocaine use?

The [National Drug Treatment Reporting System](#) (NDTRS) provides data on treated drug and alcohol misuse in Ireland.^a Of the 15,808 cases treated in 2013, 624 reported cocaine as a main problem drug.⁴

Of the 624 cases who reported cocaine as their main problem drug:

- 275 were new cases.
- 351 lived in Dublin.
- 493 (79%) were men.
- 12 (2%) were aged under 18 years; 459 (74%) were aged 18–34; 131 (21%) were aged 35–44; and 22 (3.5%) were aged 45–64.
- 471 (75%) used cocaine with other drugs.
- 49 (8%) used cocaine daily, 259 (41%) used it between two and six times per week, 78 (12%) used it once per week or less, and 191 (30%) had not used it in the last month.
- 488 (78%) sniffed or snorted cocaine, 83 (13%) smoked it, 19 (3%) ate or drank it, and 10 (1.5%) injected it.

How many people die from using cocaine?

^a The NDTRS contains information only on those who started treatment in a particular year (for the first time or returning to treatment). It does not include the number in continuous care.

The [National Drug-Related Deaths Index](#) (NDRDI) is a database of cases of death by drug and alcohol poisoning, and deaths among drug users and people who are alcohol dependent. Since 2007 there has been a 65% decrease in the number of poisoning deaths where cocaine was implicated, with 24 deaths in 2012 compared to 66 in 2007.⁵

Non-fatal overdoses and drug-related emergencies

According to the [Hospital In-Patient Enquiry \(HIPE\) scheme](#), there were 4,422 cases of non-fatal overdose discharged from Irish hospitals in 2012. Narcotic or hallucinogenic drugs were involved in 563 (13%) of these cases. Cocaine is included in this drug category and was present in 71 (13%) of cases.⁵

What does the law say about cocaine?

Cocaine is on the list of drugs that are controlled by law. A person found in possession of cocaine powder or crack cocaine is guilty of an offence. You can find more information about Irish drug laws, offences and penalties on the [Citizens Information Board website](#).

Seizures of cocaine

There has been a significant decline in the number of seizures of cocaine made by Garda and Revenue Customs officers since 2007, when the total was 1,749. There were 391 cocaine seizures in 2012 and 366 in 2013.⁶

The [Forensic Science Laboratory](#) (FSL) report on drugs seized by Garda. In 2014 the FSL reported on 104,968 grams of cocaine.⁷

For more information on cocaine, please refer to the following sources:

1. The independent health website: <http://www.irishhealth.com/article.html?id=453>
2. National Advisory Committee on Drugs and Alcohol. (2014) [Drug use in Ireland and Northern Ireland 2010/11 drug prevalence survey: cocaine results. Bulletin 4](#). National Advisory Committee on Drugs and Alcohol, Dublin.
3. European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction. (2014) [European drug report 2014: trends and developments](#). Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
4. [Treatment data](#) National Document Centre interactive tables.
5. Health Research Board. (2014) [Drug-related deaths and deaths among drug users in Ireland: 2012 figures from the National Drug-Related Deaths Index](#). Dublin: Health Research Board.
6. Health Research Board. (2014) [2014 National Report \(2013 data\) to the EMCDDA by the Reitox National Focal Point. Ireland: new developments, trends](#). Dublin: Health Research Board.
7. An Garda Síochána. (2015) [An Garda Síochána: annual report 2014](#). An Garda Síochána, Dublin .

And see also, European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction & Europol (2010) [Cocaine: a European Union perspective in the global context](#). Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

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- Books, reports, scholarly publications and grey literature
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Key resources

- Fact sheets – data on drugs and alcohol
- Interactive tables of drug treatment data
- Evidence-based reviews and guidelines
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National Documentation Centre on Drug Use

Health Research Board
Grattan House
67-72 Lower Mount Street
Dublin 2, Ireland

t +353 1 2345 175

e ndc@hrb.ie

w www.drugsandalcohol.ie

@NDCIreland

