Cocaine: Facts about its use and abuse

(EDITOR'S NOTE: The following is the second of a three-part series on cocaine use and addiction. It was prepared by the Cocaine Recovery Unit at CDU of Acadiana.)

Sgt. Joe Friday of the old TV series Dragnet was often heard to say, “Please... just the facts m'am.” This second of a three-part series will cover just that — the facts, as frightening and cold as they are.

For instance, cocaine:
- has been used by over 20 million Americans.
- is used by over 5,000 new users each day.
- has currently between 1-2 million people addicted to it.
- was injected, snorted or smoked to the tune of $40 billion last year.
- enters the U.S. at the rate of about 125 tons a year.
- has been used by one in six teenagers by the time of their senior prom.
- causes over $6 billion to be spent on drug-related law enforcement each year.

Cocaine is the most addictive of any known substance at this time.

Cocaine use is not new. It dates back to the pre-Byzantine period and was reserved for the nobility and priesthood of that time. Cocaine is an extract from the leaves of the coca plant found on mountainous slopes in Central and South America.

In the days of the Incas, natives from that area frequently chewed the leaves to experience a mild energizing effect. The practice is still common in those cocaine production regions to this date.

The active alkaloid in cocaine was extracted in 1855 and the name cocaine became attached to the substance in 1860. Between 1884 and 1887, Freud wrote a series of papers on cocaine.

These writings suggested it for depression, hysteria, hypochondria, digestive disorders and touted it as a cure for morphine and alcohol addiction. In the late 19th century and early 20th century, it was legally included as an ingredient in wine, tonics and soft drinks.

About that time, the addictive nature of cocaine became known and in 1906, the Pure Food and Drug Act prohibited the interstate shipment of products containing cocaine. In 1914, it was banned except for legitimate medical purposes.

Each user of cocaine is different, but there are general similarities when the population as a whole is considered. A profile of the cocaine user, based on a 1983 survey of 500 random callers to 1-800-COCAINES, is:
- Predominate age range is 25-40
- 85 percent white; 66 percent men
- Generally well-educated (14-plus years)
- Average annual income was $25,000-plus
- Average use of cocaine was 4.9 years
- 306 were snorting cocaine; 91 were injecting; 103 were freebasing
- Average weekly expense for cocaine was $637

Depending on how cocaine enters the body, it will do its work relatively quickly, but with a short term high. This encourages continued use by the user to maintain the high.

Typical methods of use and the times of effect on a person are:
- Nasal (snorting): 2-4 minutes with peak over 10-25 minutes
- IV: 7-15 seconds with peak over 5-10 minutes
- Free base: 7-10 seconds with peak over 5-10 minutes
- Crack: 7-10 seconds with peak over 5-10 minutes

Cocaine may produce different feelings in each user.

Generally, however, the effects are:
- Excitement, euphoria, feelings of strength and mental ability
- Heightened sexual interest

Cocaine, known as the “champagne of drugs,” is highly addictive. It becomes so important to the user that health, finances and relationships become secondary to the continued acquisition and use of cocaine.

and decreased awareness of hunger
- Increased blood pressure
- Increased body temperature, dilated pupils, goose pimples

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Many users of cocaine lose much or all of what is important in their lives in pursuit of the drug. Some users even lose their lives. In 1985, 580 cocaine related deaths were recorded in the U.S., up from 195 in 1981.

Knowing the facts about cocaine is important. The Cocaine Recovery Unit at CDU of Acadiana will provide a detailed fact sheet on cocaine for anyone calling the unit at 234-5614. No names will be requested, unless volunteered.

Next week: Cocaine treatment — there is help and hope.