Experts say cocaine can be addictive

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There is a fine line between occasional use of and addiction to cocaine — a line that some local and national experts say is non-existent.

For a long time, "snow" was seen as a "purely recreational and purely non-addictive drug," said Roslyn Gustafson, a counselor at Talbot Outpatient Center.

But that myth turned to powder in recent years as the number of individuals seeking help for compulsive use has climbed dramatically.

The difference between myth and reality became clearer last May when the first national cocaine referral and information phone-in service opened to overwhelming response, according to Dr. Mark S. Gold, medical director of the 800-COCAINElectric helpline and research director at Fair Oaks Hospital in Summit, N.J.

"Our data ... contrasts with what is popularly believed about cocaine," Gold said. "The popular view today is that cocaine is a chic, safe drug, unlike heroin, that can be used without fear of addiction."

"But callers to our helpline tell us they cannot stop even though they recognize that it is destroying their lives," he said.

Cocaine has long been seen as non-addictive because the symptoms of physical withdrawal are relatively mild when compared with heroin withdrawal, according to Steve Palys, director of the Tau Center, the drug abuse treatment facility of Our Lady of the Lake Regional Medical Center.

Physical withdrawal produces "flu-like" symptoms, Palys said.

Don Berg, a former counselor at Talbot Outpatient who is now a private consultant, said physical withdrawal from coke is "like bubblegum compared to heroin in some respects."

But "cocaine use leads to more cocaine use," and the psychological compulsion to snort, shoot or smoke more cocaine is addiction by most standards, Palys said.

"If you're going to continue to use the drug to the detriment of your health, your job and family, I consider you addicted," he added.

Putting a stop to compulsive coke use is extremely difficult, Palys and other experts said.

For one thing, cocaine is not like other drugs, even alcohol, they said.

"Most people drink, but the other side of the coin is that it is a drug and that it does have a high degree of addiction and abuse potential. Cocaine is even more so," according to Don Berg.

Very few people who choose to use cocaine think they will become addicted, but "if you happen to be one of the unfortunate people who respond positively to it, you're in a situation of being addicted ... ." according to Dr. Louis Cataldi, medical director of the Silsworth Center, a new Baton Rouge treatment facility.

It is not uncommon for individuals who have tried cocaine and enjoyed it to say they would use it more often if they could afford it, Cataldi said.

He and others agree that access determines whether many users cross the line into compulsive use.

"Over 90 percent of users use all the cocaine they have," Gold said.

"Cocaine is a success-oriented drug," Berg said. "It stimulates you, makes you more creative — at least that's the user's idea — and it's a power drug."

Cocaine's power to entrap the user into sustained use lies in its effect on "the pleasure threshold in the mind," Berg said.

"For instance, the average person gets pleasure maybe from going out on a date, seeing his kids, going to a football game, etc. There are different levels of pleasure," he said.

Cocaine raises the pleasure level so high that the mind never forgets it, Berg said.

"In other words, you start shooting or snorting cocaine, and all of a sudden, going to an LSU game ain't worth a (explosive deleted) unless you're on coke. It's just not the same any more. That's one of the factors that makes it so damned addictive," the counselor added.

Gold believes that anyone who tries cocaine risks addiction, adding that users who escape addiction today may not be able to say the same a month or year from now.

"I've certainly seen cocaine addiction. I've seen cocaine psychoses. I've seen the rebound depression from cocaine withdrawal," Cataldi said. "There's no doubt in my mind that cocaine is an addictive substance, possibly the most addicting we've ever seen."