

# Dealers rely on cutting agents as cocaine purity hits all time low

EXCLUSIVE

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The purity of powder cocaine has dropped to its lowest level since records began 25 years ago, *Druglink* can reveal.

Analysis by the Forensic Science Service (FSS) of 2,252 police seizures of cocaine between October and December last year found the average purity was 26.4 per cent.

In 2005 the average purity was 45 per cent, while in 1984 it was 63 per cent.

The latest figures show one in five of cocaine samples tested were of very low quality – with purity levels of less than nine per cent.

Experts say the slump in purity is down to UK gangs maximising profits and feeding high demand by cutting good quality imported cocaine with a new breed of cocaine-mimicking substances such as benzocaine. Despite the drop in quality of cocaine sold on the streets, the purity of cocaine arriving into the UK – seized by customs before arriving in the hands of UK drug gangs – has remained fairly steady over the last few years at around 60-65 per cent.

But is also thought that the increased use of white, powder-form anaesthetic cutting agents such as benzocaine over more traditional, sugar-based adulterants, has enabled gangs to effectively mask low cocaine content in their product. Gangs have taken advantage of their ability to cut cocaine to the bone by selling the drug in new markets to customers who are less discerning. In 2007 a *Druglink* investigation found dealers were targeting 'lower end' consumers such as students and drinkers with cheap, low purity powder, as well as selling a more expensive, better quality product to more discerning customers.

A police source told *Druglink*: "Falling cocaine purity has strong links with the types of chemicals now used as cutting agents, more so than issues around supply or demand. Compared to other adulterants, substances such as benzocaine have the appearance and the mouth-numbing effect of cocaine so dealers can get away with selling a lower product."

The popularity among dealers of new cutting agents, which also include tetramisole, phenacetin and lignocaine, is likely to have caused a significant fall in the purity of crack cocaine. The latest FSS figures, from December last year, show the average purity of crack seized by police has dropped to 41 per cent – compared to 70 per cent in 1984. Until the mid 2000s, cocaine was commonly cut with mannitol and sorbitol – sugar alcohols which dissolve when cocaine powder is 'cooked up' to form purer rocks of crack. But adulterants such as benzocaine, the most common substance used to dilute cocaine in the UK, are carried over during the process, producing crack which remains 'cut'.

Bill Hughes, Director General of the Serious Organised Crime Agency (SOCA) told *Druglink* that the purity of cocaine sold on UK streets has been driven down by a combination of factors including the use of new cutting agents such as benzocaine, a doubling in wholesale prices and a series of high volume seizures of UK-destined cocaine.

SOCA has for the last 12 months been targeting individuals and gangs at the centre of the trade in cutting agents. Detectives, who believe SOCA's operation has made a sizeable dent in the trade, are arresting gangs after linking shipments of cutting agents to stashes of cocaine.

An estimated 35 to 45 tons of cocaine enters the UK each year. Once cocaine is



smuggled into the UK, typically in 1kg blocks, importers are cutting it as soon as it arrives in the country. Large powder presses are used to 're-block' the cocaine to make it look 'fresh off the boat' before it is sold on. Increasing amounts of police seizures are finding re-blocked cocaine with brandmarks, such as sports firm Puma, to mimic importation grade cocaine. As the cocaine falls through the supply chain, it is cut and cut again.

The market in cutting agents, also known on the streets as 'bash' or 'smash', has become so established some criminals have ditched selling illegal drugs to deal solely in the chemicals. Cutting agents such as benzocaine are vital to high and middle level dealers if they want to make a worthwhile profit. Most middle level dealers cut their cocaine 50-50 with cutting agents, increasing their profits by up to five times.

Used in over the counter ointments, dentistry and as a fish tranquilliser, benzocaine is typically being bought from source countries such as China over the internet for around £3,000 a metric ton. It is sold to dealers in 25kg sealed kegs for between £2,000 and £8,000.

Forensic expert Dr Les King, a member of the government's advisory panel on drugs, told *Druglink*: "There is evidence to show that demand is going up in this country and more people are using cocaine than ever before. It is a reflection of this greater demand that is causing dealers to cut the drug more."

"But I haven't seen any evidence to show that purity is down because enforcement agencies along the supply chain have intercepted more cocaine, or that supply has been seriously reduced."