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Ketamine



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What is it?

Ketamine is a very complex drug, an anaesthetic with analgesic, stimulant and psychedelic properties, chemically related to phencyclidine (PCP). Like PCP, ketamine is a 'dissociative' anaesthetic: patients feel detached and remote from their immediate environment. Illicit users say that under its influence, they assume a different point of view, outside of body and self.

Druglink magazine first reported ketamine use in January 2000, when Dr Karl Jansen wrote a piece explaining the drug's effect on the brain. He wrote that the psychedelic effects probably stemmed from the drug binding to phencyclidine receptors in the brain. He noted anecdotal cases of addiction in users. *Druglink* magazine followed this up in 2009, reporting increasing instances of use among young people, despite the drug being banned in 2006.

Legal status

Ketamine is a Class C drug under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. The legislation came into effect on 1 January 2006.

Prevalence

According to the British Crime Survey (BCS), around 714,000 16 to 59-year-olds are estimated to have taken ketamine in their lifetime, and 207,000 in the last year. It is particularly prevalent amongst young people, with 66 per cent of those who admitted taking the drug in the last year being 16 to 24-year-olds. The relatively high numbers of young people who admitted using ketamine comes despite the fact BCS researchers state that students are under-represented in the statistics because halls of residences are not canvassed.

Use in this age group has almost doubled since the drug was brought under control of the Misuse of Drugs Act. An estimated 0.8 per cent of 16 to 24-year-olds had taken it in the last month in 2006/07. This had risen to 2.1 per cent by 2010/11. A 2009 survey in the specialist clubbing magazine *Mixmag* suggested that as many as 68 per cent of clubbers had tried the drug.

Price

In 2005, the average price of a gram of ketamine was £30. Depending on the locality, it can now be bought from anywhere between £10 and £30, with the latest *Street Drug Trends* survey reporting an average price of £21.

Effects/risks

Ketamine is a dissociative anaesthetic, meaning users will feel detached from themselves and their immediate surroundings. The drug also has painkilling, stimulant and psychedelic effects. Effects are immediate if injected, though this practice is rarer, with most users sniffing the drug. Using the drug this way, the effects will take around 20 minutes to come on, and can last for one or two hours. At a relatively low dosage, users will commonly experience mild dissociative effects, hallucinations, and will feel distortions of time and space. Larger doses may induce a so called 'K-hole', where a user can experience considerable and lengthy detachment from reality.

Concerns over the risks of using the drug have been growing in recent years. While symptoms such as ketamine-induced ulcerative cystitis, where the bladder wall thickens, have only been recently identified, the risk of death from accidents has been long known. Its dissociative effects may make users unaware of potentially risky behaviour. One study found that as many as 83% of 90 ketamine users knew of someone who had an accident from taking ketamine. As a powerful analgesic, ketamine use can make users more vulnerable to physical injury as the seriousness of an incident may not be immediately apparent.

Other health problems that are known to have arisen from frequent ketamine use include kidney dysfunction and increased abdominal pain known as 'K-cramps'. Frequent use may also lead to depression.

There is evidence that heavy use of the drug can lead to dependence. Reports from regular users, suggest that tolerance to ketamine can also develop, with heavy use precipitating higher dosages to achieve similar effects.