

# Factsheet: Cocaine - the Irish situation

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## Glossary of terms

**Drug prevalence**— refers to the proportion of a population that has used a named drug during a particular time period. That is, how many people in specific group have used a drug during a specified timeframe.

**Last month prevalence** – refers to the proportion of a population that reported using a named drug in the 30-day period prior to the survey. Last month prevalence is often referred to as current use. Some of those reporting current use may be occasional or first-time users who happen to have used in the period leading up to the survey, so current use is not the same as regular use.

**Last year prevalence** – refers to the proportion of a population that reported using a named drug in the 12 months prior to the survey. Last year prevalence is often referred to as recent use.

**Lifetime prevalence** – refers to the proportion of a population that reported ever having used a named drug before the time they were surveyed. A person who records lifetime prevalence may or may not be currently using the drug. Lifetime prevalence should not be interpreted as meaning that people have used a drug over a long period of time or that they will use the drug again in future.

**Representative sample** – a subset of a larger population that reflects the characteristics of that entire group.

## 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](#) is a strong but short acting stimulant drug ('upper') which comes in a white powder. It can be used by dividing it into lines and snorting it up the nose with a tooter/snorter or straw. It can also be smoked or made into a solution to inject.
- [Crack cocaine](#) is a smokeable form of cocaine which is made by chemically altering cocaine powder to form crystals or rocks. It can be smoked or dissolved in an acidic liquid and injected.<sup>1</sup>

## What does cocaine do?

### Short-term effects

- Effects of cocaine start quickly but only last for up to 30 minutes
- You may feel more alert, energetic, exhilarated and confident
- Your heart and pulse rate speed up suddenly
- Hyperactivity, dilated pupils, dry mouth, sweating and loss of appetite
- Higher doses can make you feel very anxious and panicky
- Increased sex drive

### Long-term effects

- Tightness in chest, insomnia, exhaustion and unable to relax
- Dry mouth, sweating, mood swings and loss of appetite
- You may become aggressive or even violent
- You may feel depressed and run down
- Damage to nose tissue
- Digestive disorders, dehydration and anorexia
- Kidney damage
- If you use it often you may lose your sex drive
- Injecting may cause abscesses
- Smoking may cause breathing problems
- Anxiety, paranoia and hallucinations, if you use a lot
- Weight loss<sup>1</sup>

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

The Healthy Ireland survey is an annual survey designed to increase knowledge of the population's health and health behaviours.<sup>2</sup> It is commissioned by the Department of Health, carried out by Ipsos

B&A, and conducted with a representative sample of the population of the Republic of Ireland aged 15 years and over. For the 2023 survey, telephone interviews took place between October 2022 and April 2023. 6,407 out of the total 7,411 survey respondents agreed to participate in the module on drug use providing a participation rate of 86% of survey respondents.

### How many people use cocaine in Ireland?

According to the Healthy Ireland survey, in 2022/23:

- 8% of respondents report lifetime cocaine use. 2% report last year cocaine use, with 1% of the population reporting last month cocaine use.
- Men (3%) are more likely than women (1%) to report last year cocaine use.
- Cocaine use in the last year is most common among those aged 15-34, see Table 1.
- Men aged 25-34 (8%) have the highest prevalence of last year cocaine use, compared to 2% of women in the same age group.
- Last month cocaine use is most common among those aged 15-24 and 25-34 inclusive (1%).

Table 1: Last year prevalence of cocaine use by age group (%)

	2002/03	2006/07	2010/11	2014/15	2019/20	2022/23
15–64 years	1.1	1.7	1.5	1.5	2.3	1.0
15–34 years	2.0	3.1	2.8	2.9	4.8	2.2

Source: unpublished data

For further information on cocaine use (prevalence and treatment) see our [Regional data factsheets](#).

Cocaine is, after cannabis, the second most commonly used illicit drug in Europe, although prevalence levels and patterns of use differ considerably between countries. 2.7 million 15-34-year-olds (2.7% of this age group) used cocaine in the last year.<sup>3</sup>

### How many 15–16-year-old students in Ireland use cocaine?

The European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD) has conducted surveys of school-going children every four years since 1995, using a standardised method and a common questionnaire (see [www.espad.org](http://www.espad.org) ). The eighth survey<sup>4</sup> was undertaken in 37 European countries during 2024 and collected information on alcohol, tobacco and other substance use among 15-16-year-old students. In Ireland the final sample included 1,880 students born in 2008. The study found that:

- 11.8% of students in Ireland used cocaine in their lifetime, compared to 11.3% all ESPAD countries.
- More male (12.1%) than female respondents (11.3%) have ever tried cocaine (lifetime use).
- 10.2% of students had used cocaine in the last 12 months (recent use).
- 4.9% had used cocaine in the last 30 days (current use).

- Cocaine was considered to be the most easily accessible drug (14.3%).

For further information go to the [ESPAD data portal](#) where you can search for “cocaine” and filter by Ireland.

## 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.<sup>a</sup> When someone in treatment has been using multiple drugs, one is identified as their ‘main problem’ drug. In 2024, 13,295 cases entered treatment for problem drug use.

- Cocaine was the most common drug reported in 2024, accounting for 39.8% of all cases entering treatment, a 7.4% increase from 2023.
- Cocaine was also the most common main drug among new cases, accounting for almost one-half (46.8%) in 2024.
- For previously treated cases, cocaine accounted for 35.8% of cases, the highest number recorded to date.
- Powder cocaine increased by 216.0% over the time period and crack cocaine increased by 668.2%.
- Between 2017 and 2024 there was a 426.1% increase among females who have sought drug treatment for cocaine, from 284 cases in 2017 to 1,494 cases in 2024.
- Between 2017 and 2024 there was a 299.4% increase in the number of previously treated cases reporting cocaine as a main problem, from 692 cases in 2017 to 2,764 cases in 2024.
- Cocaine (41.7%) was the most common additional substance reported by previously treated cases with polydrug use in 2024.<sup>5</sup>

**Table 2: Main problem drug (excluding alcohol) reported in 30 days prior to treatment, NDTRS 2017 to 2024**

	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
<b>All cases</b>	8,922	10,274	10,664	9,702	10,769	12,009	13,104	13,295
Cocaine	1,500 (16.8)	2,254 (21.9)	1,560 (24.0)	2,619 (27.0)	3,248 (30.2)	4,084 (34.0)	4,923 (37.6)	5,289 (39.8)
<b>New cases</b>	3,257	3,962	3,979	3,796	4,206	4,456	4,792	4,771
Cocaine	748 (23.0)	12.32 (31.1)	1,258 (31.6)	1,359 (35.8)	1,615 (38.4)	1,839 (41.3)	2,208 (46.1)	2,235 (46.8)
<b>Previously treated cases</b>	5,242	5,872	5,927	5,441	6,090	6,860	7,588	7,717
Cocaine	692 (13.2)	944 (16.1)	1,074 (18.1)	1,126 (20.7)	1,478 (24.3)	1,981 (28.9)	2,485 (32.7)	2,764 (35.8)

Note: N is the number of cases. The percentage is in brackets

### Powder cocaine

In 2024, 3,959 cases were recorded with powder cocaine as the main problem:

<sup>a</sup> 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. Note: Cases are episodes of treatment not individuals, which means there is a possibility that individuals appear more than once in the data; for example, where a person receives treatment at more than one centre, or at the same centre more than once in a calendar year.

- almost 8-in-10 cases (77.4%) were male, while 2-in-10 were female (22.4%)
- the median age when entering treatment for powder cocaine was 32 years
- powder cocaine cases resided in every county in Ireland. Almost half (47.4%) of all cases entering treatment for powder cocaine resided in County Dublin, followed by counties Cork (7.1%), Tipperary (4.7%) and Limerick (4.5%)
- 38.8% were in paid employment, while 53.3% were unemployed
- 5.1% were homeless
- 2.7% reported having ever injected
- the most common route of administration for powder cocaine was sniff/snort (96.5%)
- the proportion of cases with polydrug use was 62.1% in 2024. The most common additional drugs among cases with powder cocaine as a main problem were alcohol (63.9%), cannabis (49.5%), and benzodiazepines (23.2%).

### **Crack cocaine**

In 2024, 1,329 cases were recorded with crack cocaine as the main problem:

- more than 4-in-10 cases (45.6%) entering treatment for crack cocaine as the main problem were female, while 54.3% were male
- the median age when entering treatment for crack cocaine was 40 years
- crack cocaine cases resided in almost every county in Ireland, with the exception of two counties (Leitrim and Monaghan) which had no reported cases. The vast majority (79.6%) of all cases entering treatment for crack cocaine resided in County Dublin, followed by Limerick (3.2%), Meath (2.4%) and Kildare (2.1%)
- 7.2% were in paid employment, while 82.0% were unemployed
- 21.2% were homeless
- 32.9% reported having ever injected
- The most common route of administration for crack cocaine was smoking (95.0%)
- The proportion of cases with polydrug use was 63.5% in 2024. The most common additional drugs among cases with crack cocaine as a main problem were opioids (55.6%), benzodiazepines (47.4%) and cannabis (33.2%).

[For more detailed treatment data (age, gender, employment status) up to 2023 see library [interactive tables](#)]

## **How many people die from using cocaine?**

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. In 2021, 354 deaths were poisonings. Cocaine was implicated in 3 in 10 (30.2%) poisoning deaths overall, the majority of which were among males (81.3%, 87). The number of deaths with cocaine implicated more than trebled (311.5%) (from 26 to 107 deaths).<sup>6</sup>

**Table 2: Cocaine implicated in poisoning deaths, NDRDI 2012-2021**

	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
All poisoning deaths	273	324	311	310	307	325	361	375	439	354
Cocaine	26	32	42	46	42	55	79	108	140	107

## Non-fatal overdoses and drug-related emergencies

According to the [Hospital In-Patient Enquiry \(HIPE\)](#) scheme there were 4,476 cases of non-fatal overdose discharged from Irish hospitals in 2023. Cocaine was present in 263 (5.9%) of cases.<sup>7</sup>

## What does the law say about cocaine?

In Ireland, 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

Except for a 10% spike between 2013 and 2014, the number of cocaine seizures has decreased from a peak of 1,749 in 2007 to 364 in 2015. One possible explanation for this is that the economy in Ireland was not doing well in 2013 and 2014. Although an increase in cocaine analyses was seen in 2016 (63%) and 2017 (33%) Although a decrease of 25% was shown in 2018, this was followed by a substantial increase in 2019 (N=2231), when the number of cocaine seizures analysed was close to four times higher than in 2018 (N=595). The number of cocaine seizures analysed in 2020 was 11% lower than those analysed in 2019. However, since then an increasing trajectory was seen between 2020 and 2021 (34%), and again between 2021 and 2022 (50%). No new data is available for 2023.<sup>8</sup>

## References

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8. Irish National Focal Point to the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (2025) [Ireland: national report for 2024 – drug markets and crime](#). Dublin: Health Research Board.

And see also, European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction, Europol (2022) [EU drug market: cocaine — in-depth analysis](#). Lisbon: European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction.

For regional Irish data, please see our [regional factsheets webpage](#).

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