

Factsheet – Cocaine: the Irish situation

April 2019

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 powder is a white crystalline powder (hydrochloride salt) and is the most commonly used form. Drug dealers often dilute cocaine powder with other substances, such as talcum powder or sugar (lactose), or local anaesthetic (lignocaine). It is usually inhaled through a thin straw, or dissolved in water and injected.
- Crack cocaine is an off-white solid substance made by dissolving cocaine powder in a mixture of water and baking soda; this mixture is boiled, dried and broken into rock-like chunks. It can be smoked, or dissolved in an acidic liquid and injected.¹

What does cocaine do?

The effects of cocaine occur very rapidly and include raised blood pressure, increased body temperature, stimulation, reduction in hunger and thirst, dilation of pupils and feelings of great energy and alertness. Repeated sniffing of cocaine powder irritates the nose and can cause a breakdown of nasal cartilage.¹

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

Every four years the National Advisory Committee on Drugs and Alcohol (NACDA) and the Northern Ireland Public Health Information and Research Branch (PHIRB) commission a survey of the general population to estimate the number of people in Ireland who use drugs and alcohol.² Face-to-face interviews take place with respondents aged 15+^a normally resident in households in Ireland and Northern Ireland. This type of survey is not designed to include people who do not normally live in private households (such as prisoners or hostel dwellers).

How many people use cocaine in Ireland?

The 2014/15 survey involved 9,505 people (7,005 in Ireland and 2,500 in Northern Ireland). The results for Ireland showed that:

- Lifetime usage of cocaine (including crack) and cocaine powder at 6.6% and 6.4%

^a In the most recent survey 2014/15 the sample population was extended from 15-64 years to include all those aged 15+ years.

respectively.

- The percentage of respondents aged 15-64 years who reported using cocaine (including crack) at some point in their lives increased from 7% to 8%.
- The proportion of young adults (15-34) who reported using cocaine in their lifetimes has also increased from 9% to 11%.
- Similar to the previous studies, more men reported using cocaine in their lifetimes compared to women (11% vs. 5%).

The latest survey estimates show a rise in the percentage of cocaine users in the general population aged 15-64:

Table 1: Lifetime, last year and last month prevalence of cocaine use in the general population

	2002/03 %	2006/7 %	2010/11 %	2014/15 %
Lifetime	3.0	5.3	6.8	7.8
Last year	1.1	1.7	1.5	1.5
Last month	0.4	0.5	0.5	0.5

It is estimated that about 17 million Europeans (5.1% of the population aged 15–64 years) have used cocaine at least once in their life. In the last year it is estimated that 3.5 million (1.1%) of adults (15–64) and 2.3 million (1.9%) of young adults (15–34) used cocaine.³

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.^b

Cocaine remains the third most common main drug reported, accounting for 16.8% of cases treated in 2017. Since 2013, the number of cocaine cases has been increasing, with the largest increase occurring between 2016 and 2017 (31.8%).⁴

A total of 1,500 cases were treated for cocaine use in 2017, almost double the number of cases in 2011 (770 cases).

- The number of new cases treated has risen from 396 in 2011 to 748 in 2017.
- The median age for cases treated has increased from 28 in 2011 to 30 in 2018.
- Males accounted for 4 in every 5 cases (80%) over the reporting period.
- The proportion of cases in paid employment increased from 20% in 2011 to 34% in 2017.
- The proportion of cases that reported using more than one drug decreased over the period from 77% in 2011 to 63% in 2017.
- The most common additional drugs reported among cocaine cases were alcohol (58%), cannabis (48%) and benzodiazepines (25%).

[For more detailed treatment data (age, gender, employment status) up to 2016 see library [interactive tables](#)]

^b 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.

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. Cocaine-related deaths increased between 2010 and 2015, with a slight decrease to 41 deaths in 2016 compared to 45 deaths reported in 2015. Cocaine and cannabis were the most common drugs used by those who died as a result of hanging.⁵

Non-fatal overdoses and drug-related emergencies

According to the [Hospital In-Patient Enquiry \(HIPE\)](#) scheme there were 4,233 cases of non-fatal overdose discharged from Irish hospitals in 2013. Narcotic or hallucinogenic drugs were involved in 587 (14%) of these cases. Cocaine is included in this drug category and was present in 60 (10%) of cases.⁶

What does the law say about cocaine?

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

There has been a significant decline in the number of seizures of cocaine made by Garda and Revenue Customs officers since 2007, when the total was 1,749. There were 366 cocaine seizures in 2013 and 405 in 2014.⁶ In 2016 just over 90 Kgs of cocaine was seized.⁷

For more information on cocaine, please refer to the following sources:

1. The independent health website: <http://www.irishhealth.com/article.html?id=453>
2. National Advisory Committee on Drugs & Public Health Information and Research Branch (2016) [Prevalence of drug use and gambling in Ireland & drug use in Northern Ireland](#). Bulletin 1. Dublin: National Advisory Committee on Drugs and Alcohol.
3. European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction. (2018) [European Drug Report 2018: trends and developments](#). Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
4. Health Research Board. (2019) [Drug Treatment in Ireland NDTRS 2011 to 2017](#). Dublin: Health Research Board.
5. Health Research Board. (2019) [National Drug-Related Deaths Index 2004 to 2016 data](#). Dublin: Health Research Board.
6. Irish National Focal Point to the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction. (2016) [Ireland: national report for 2015 - drug markets and crime](#). Dublin: Health Research Board.
7. An Garda Síochána. (2017) [An Garda Síochána: annual report 2016](#). An Garda Síochána, Dublin.

And see also, European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (2016) [Perspectives on drugs: cocaine trafficking to Europe](#). Lisbon: European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction.

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