

Cocaine

Caviar or placebo: Is it worth it?

By CAROLINE PETRICH
Of the Emerald

Sometimes I think cocaine is bad for me —
Then I stop thinking . . .

"Cocaine" by Dave Van Ronk

Whiff, toot, blow, snort, coke — every cocaine sniffer has a name for the caviar of drugdom.

Jerry Beck, information specialist at the University's Drug Information Center, calls cocaine an "active placebo."

"Unless you're doing a fairly large amount, a good part of the high is the social setting," Beck says.

"At the doses commonly employed (by sniffers), the high tends to be fairly mild. A lot of the high can be attributed to the user's expectations," Beck says.

Cocaine, a derivative alkaloid that comes from the coca plant indigenous to the South American Andes mountains, stimulates the central nervous system. This stimulation causes various physical effects — notably euphoria, numbed nose and mouth, and dilated pupils.

Methods to get high on cocaine vary. Most users snort cocaine through their noses after it is cut into a fine powder with a razor, according to Beck. Others inject the drug into their veins.

One relatively new method of injection is called "free-basing." Free-base is the part of the cocaine compound that is extracted with specialized kits bought from head shops. It is then smoked.

However it gets there, once the drug enters the bloodstream it stimulates the peripheral nervous system that controls the major body organs

responsible for arousal, says Beck.

The drug's major interaction occurs in the brain. Scientists hypothesize that cocaine inhibits the reabsorption of the hormone norepinephrine, which the nerve endings release when stimulated — and which causes blood pressure to rise once it's back in the nerves.

The cocaine high lasts from 20 to 30 minutes if snorted. If the coke is injected or mainlined, the high may be more intense but won't last as long. According to one user who has tried injection, "You get high faster and you come down hard."

There are side effects to consider, however. Injecting anything intravenously — especially an illegal drug — is risky at best. "Given the state of the art, and the random sampling of cuts available to every dealer through whose hands street-coke passes, shooting up is a sucker move," writes Robert Sabbag in *Snowblind*, a book chronicling the experiences of a cocaine dealer.

Even at \$100 a gram, cocaine consumers usually risk buying less than pure cocaine. Beck estimates that most of the coke that comes to Eugene is "less than 50-percent pure."

"There is no way of knowing for sure," he adds. "But we often find (when analyzing coke) that it contains four or five different chemicals."

The farther the coke travels the more impure it will be, Beck says.

Dealers dilute, or "cut," cocaine with various chemicals, such as speed or mannite (an Italian laxative), or lactose (a milk sugar) and other additives, Beck says.

Cocaine use in Eugene has become rampant in the past year, according to Mike Wright of the

Federal Drug Enforcement Center in Eugene.

"Cocaine is readily available to anyone who wants to buy it," Wright says.

Hospitals also are increasing their use of cocaine as a therapeutic drug. Hospitals use cocaine as a topical anesthetic in nose, throat, and larynx surgery, according to Mark Miller of the Drug Information Center.

Cocaine causes veins to constrict and thereby decreases the amount of blood lost during an operation.

If one is arrested for illegal possession of the drug, there is a good chance of going to jail for a Class B felony, Wright says.

For a first offense, the violator can receive a five-year prison sentence and a \$15,000 fine. A second offense earns a 10-year prison term and a \$30,000 fine. Wright adds such heavy punishments could do severe damage to a college career.

Beck is more encouraging than Wright when he discusses courtroom diplomacy in cocaine-related cases. "A violation involving any amount can be plea-bargained down to a misdemeanor," he says.

But even that has its costs. Simply put, "If you get caught, you spend many thousands of dollars in lawyers' fees," Beck says.

Beck also offered final advice to students interested in coke.

"I would tell students basically to educate themselves, to know what they're doing and to evaluate the cost," he says. "I think a lot of students get into financial trouble because of coke."



Photo by Erich Boekeheide

'Lookalike' drugs pose dangers

By RACHEL BELLAMY
Of the Emerald

University students who buy street drugs to increase study time may not be getting the drugs they're paying for, warns Drug Information Center director Mark Miller.

"Lookalikes," also known as "pea-shooters," are 100-percent legal drugs containing combinations of caffeine, ephedrine and phenylpropanolamine — the same substances found in over-the-counter stimulants, decongestants and antihistamines — and are a growing problem in Lane County, Miller says.

Miller says he "will personally guarantee that today you can't find real amphetamines" on the street — only lookalikes.

The nationwide lookalike boom began in the late 1970s in response to declining amphetamine production, and has recently expanded to include phony cocaine and "downers."

The most prevalent lookalikes in the Eugene area are black capsules known as "black beauties," yellow "704" capsules, cross-top capsules, pink hearts and speckled "blue egg" tablets, Miller says.

Lookalikes are almost identical to their real pharmaceutical counterparts. The logo or company markings may be slightly different, but on a tiny capsule it takes a sharp and knowledgeable eye to detect the difference, Miller says.

The price difference is more evident, Miller says.

The over-the-counter price for the drug compositions is 5 to 18 cents. Miller says the street buyer may pay from 25 cents to \$1.

Most people are understandably "a little upset" to learn they've purchased legal combinations of caffeine and phenylpropanolamine, he says.

Just because the drugs are legal doesn't mean they're safe, Miller warns.

"Drugs are not classified as safe or dangerous," he says.

Miller says he's more concerned about the drugs' effects on the user's heart rate, respiration, blood pressure and the added risks for users with existing health problems.

"Many people think if they've experimented with drugs, they know the safety rules," but misrepresented drugs pose new problems, he says.

The lookalikes have an additive effect, and because people take drugs "until they feel it, they may be unaware of the exces-

sive amount of stimulants they're taking," he says.

Coffee, tea, chocolate, and even carbonated sodas contain caffeine that can intensify the reaction and side effects of the ingested drug, he adds.

Miller says reported reactions to the phony speed include strong headaches, nausea and vomiting.

What can be done legally about fraudulent drug sales?

"Not much," says deputy district attorney Jim Hunt, supervisor of the Lane Interagency Narcotics Team.

The initial sale is not illegal, and "so long as the seller is properly represented" there is no violation. It's after the drugs are broken down into street bags and sold as the real thing that misrepresentation occurs.

"If a person knew they were selling phony drugs, how do you prove that?" Hunt asks.

From a consumer's point of view, Hunt says there's no legal recourse. The purchaser enters into a contract for contraband substances and there is "no way to enforce that as a legal contract."

Until purchasers are better educated about drugs, the old adage of "buyer beware" applies, Hunt says.

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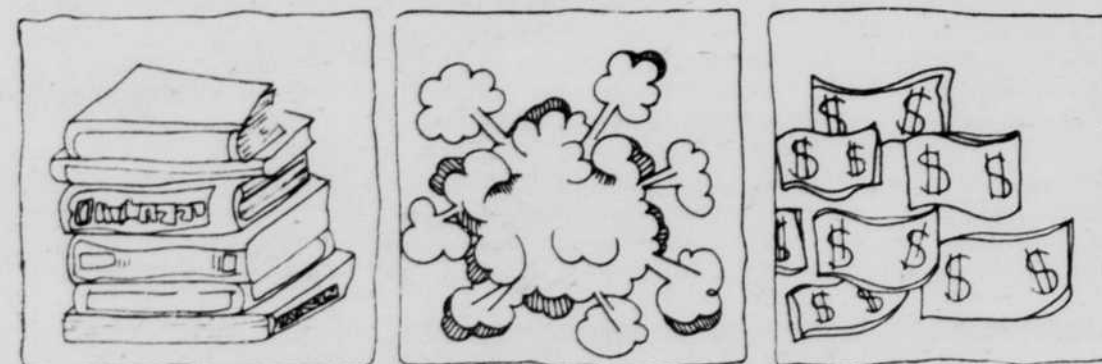
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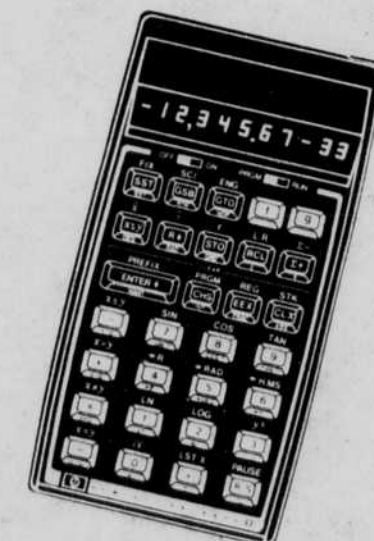


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