

## Do You Know...

**Street names:** special K, K, ket, vitamin K, cat tranquilizers

### What is it?

Ketamine is a fast-acting anesthetic and painkiller used primarily in veterinary surgery. It is also used to a lesser extent in human medicine.

Ketamine can produce vivid dreams and a feeling that the mind is separated from the body. This effect, called “dissociation,” is also produced by the related drug PCP. Ketamine’s mind-altering effects make it prone to abuse. When ketamine is used in human medicine, it is often given with sedative drugs to offset these effects.

Ketamine

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## What does ketamine look like?

Ketamine prepared for medical use is a colourless, tasteless and odourless liquid that can be injected. Ketamine is usually converted into a white powder before it is sold illegally. It may also be sold as capsules or tablets. The powder can be snorted, mixed into drinks or dissolved for injection. The liquid can be added to drinks or to marijuana or tobacco.

## Who uses ketamine?

Ketamine is legally available only to veterinarians and medical doctors for medical use. The ketamine sold illegally on the street or in clubs is often stolen or diverted.

Ketamine has been used for its mind-altering effects since the 1970s. In the 1990s ketamine became known as a “club drug” for its use in the dance club scene.

A 2011 survey of Ontario students in grades 7 to 12 reported that 0.9 per cent had used ketamine at least once in the past year.

## How does ketamine make you feel?

The way ketamine—or any other drug—affects you depends on many factors, including:

- your age and your body weight
- how much you take and how often you take it
- how long you’ve been taking it
- the method you use to take the drug
- the environment you’re in
- whether or not you have certain pre-existing medical or psychiatric conditions
- if you’ve taken any alcohol or other drugs (illegal, prescription, over-the counter or herbal).

At low doses, ketamine can have stimulant effects. Users report a sense of floating, dissociation and numbness in the body. When ketamine is taken in higher doses, users often become withdrawn. They may not remember who or where they are, and may stumble if they try to walk, feel their hearts race and find it difficult to breathe. High doses can also cause loss of consciousness.

Visual experiences can include blurred vision, seeing “trails,” and intense hallucinations. Some report feelings of an “out-of-body” or “near-death” experience. These experiences of detachment are sometimes described as a place known as “the K-hole.” This experience can be terrifying.

## How long does the feeling last?

The effects of ketamine are usually felt between one and 30 minutes after taking the drug, depending on whether it is injected, snorted or taken by mouth. The effects usually last about an hour. Some users may feel low or anxious, have some memory loss and experience flashbacks of their drug experience long after the effects of the drug have worn off.

## Is ketamine dangerous?

Yes. If it is not used under the care of health professionals in a medical setting, users of ketamine put themselves at risk in a number of ways:

- Like all anesthetics, ketamine prevents users from feeling pain. This means that if injury occurs, a person may not know it. People under its effects may have difficulty standing up and be confused about their surroundings. Ketamine-related injuries and fatalities are often the result of falls and other accidents.
- Ketamine has been labelled a “rape drug.” This is because it can be slipped into someone’s drink without the person’s knowledge, and its effects can render the person unable to resist sexual assault.
- Ketamine raises heart rate and blood pressure, which can increase the risk of stroke or heart attack.
- Frequent use of ketamine may cause bladder problems (e.g., increased need to urinate, passing blood in urine).
- The ketamine sold at clubs may be mixed with other drugs. Taking ketamine with other drugs can have unpredictable and sometimes dangerous effects.
- Driving or operating machinery while under the influence of ketamine, or any drug, increases the risk of physical injury to the user and to others.

## Is ketamine addictive?

Regular users of ketamine soon become tolerant to the dissociative effects of the drug, meaning more and more is needed to achieve the same effect. Some people do become addicted, and continue to use ketamine even when they plan not to or despite its negative effects. It is not clear whether people who are addicted to ketamine experience any symptoms of withdrawal when they stop taking the drug.

## What are the long-term effects of using ketamine?

Research into the non-medical use of ketamine suggests that the long-term effects can include flashbacks, social withdrawal and memory loss.

## One in a series...

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