

Ketamine.

What is ketamine?

Ketamine is used by medical practitioners and veterinarians as an anaesthetic. It is sometimes used illegally by people to get high.

Ketamine is a dissociative drug, which means it acts on different chemicals in the brain to produce visual and auditory distortion, and a detachment from reality.

When it's sold illegally, ketamine usually comes as a white or off white powder. It can also be made into pills, or dissolved in a liquid.¹

A number of clinical trials and studies are currently being undertaken to assess ketamine as a treatment for depression, early indications are showing good results.²

Other names

Special K, K, ket, kitkat, super k or horse trunk.^{3,4}

How is it used?

Ketamine can be swallowed, snorted or injected. It is also sometimes smoked with cannabis or tobacco. The effects of ketamine may be experienced within 1 minute if injected, 5–15 minutes if snorted, and up to 30 minutes if swallowed. The effects of ketamine can last for around an hour, however an individual's coordination or senses may be affected for up to 24 hours after initial use.

Effects of ketamine

There is no safe level of drug use. Use of any drug always carries some risk. It's important to be careful when taking any type of drug.

Ketamine affects everyone differently, based on:

- size, weight and health
- whether the person is used to taking it
- whether other drugs are taken around the same time
- the amount taken
- the strength of the drug (varies from batch to batch).

The following effects may be experienced:

- feeling happy and relaxed
- feeling detached from your body ('falling into a k-hole')
- perceptual changes, such as visual and auditory hallucinations
- confusion and clumsiness
- increased heart rate and blood pressure
- slurred speech and blurred vision
- anxiety, panic and violence
- vomiting
- lowered sensitivity to pain.

Overdose

If you take a large amount of ketamine or have a strong batch, you could overdose. The risk of death from ketamine alone is low, due to its ability to cause unconsciousness with minimal impact on airway reflexes or blood circulation.⁷ However, individuals place themselves at a higher risk of physical harm/accidents while under the influence of the ketamine.⁷ If you or someone you know is having any of the symptoms below, call an ambulance straight away by dialling triple zero (000). Ambulance officers don't need to involve the police.

- inability to move, rigid muscles
- high blood pressure, fast heartbeat
- convulsions
- unconsciousness and 'near death' experiences
- death.

Coming down

In the day following ketamine use, you may experience:

- memory loss
- impaired judgement, disorientation
- clumsiness
- aches and pains
- anxiety.^{3,4,6}

Long-term effects

Regular use of ketamine may eventually cause:

- flashbacks
- poor sense of smell (from snorting)
- mood and personality changes, depression
- poor memory, thinking and concentration
- abnormal liver or kidney function
- ketamine bladder syndrome (see below)
- abdominal pain
- needing to use more to get the same effect
- dependence on ketamine
- financial, work and social problems.^{3,4,6}

Ketamine bladder syndrome

Large, repeated doses of ketamine may eventually cause 'ketamine bladder syndrome', a painful condition needing ongoing treatment. Symptoms include difficulty holding in urine, incontinence, which can cause ulceration in the bladder. Anyone suffering from ketamine bladder syndrome needs to stop using ketamine and see a health professional.^{3,6}

Using ketamine with other drugs

The effects of taking ketamine with other drugs—including over-the-counter or prescribed medications—can be unpredictable and dangerous, and could cause:

- **Ketamine + alcohol or opiates:** When used with other depressant drugs, the combined effects may lead to the functioning of the heart or lungs to slow or stop, and can result in death.⁶
- **Ketamine + amphetamines, ecstasy and cocaine:** enormous strain on the body, which can lead to fast heart rate.³

Withdrawal

Giving up ketamine after using it for a long time is challenging because the body has to get used to functioning without it. The symptoms can include:

- cravings for ketamine
- no appetite
- tiredness
- chills, sweating
- restlessness, tremors
- nightmares, anxiety, depression
- irregular and rapid heartbeat.³

Find out more about withdrawal at adf.org.au/alcohol-drug-use/supporting-a-loved-one/withdrawal/

Ketamine and the law

Legally produced ketamine is a restricted substance and only a doctor or vet may prescribe or administer it. All other ketamine is illegal in Australia.

Federal and state laws provide penalties for the illegal use, possession, production, selling or driving under the influence of ketamine.

Penalties can include fines, imprisonment and disqualification from driving.

Ketamine statistics Ketamine

- 1.9% of Australians aged 14 years and over have used ketamine one or more times in their life.
- 4% of Australians aged 14 years and over have used ketamine in the previous 12 months.⁸

Young people

- Young Australians (aged 14–29) first try ketamine at 20.1 years on average.