

Social cocaine use more harmful than you think

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(Medical Xpress)—In addition to recent high profile cocaine possession arrests and the Australian Crime Commission's Illicit Drug Data Report 2012-2013 being released today, University of Sydney research has found that people who use cocaine 'socially' are at greater risk of developing cardiovascular disease.

The findings, published in leading medical journal *PLOS ONE*, show that social cocaine users had increased aortic stiffness, increased systolic blood pressure, and greater left ventricular mass, compared with the non-users. These measures are all well-known risk factors for premature cardiovascular events.

Paper senior author Professor Gemma Figtree, Sydney Medical School, said that the acute cardiovascular side effects of cocaine such as myocardial infarction ([heart attack](#)) and myocardial ischaemia are well known.

"However, the chronic effect of regular cocaine use in otherwise healthy adults who consider themselves 'social' users is more difficult to establish," she said.

"We have examined the longer term consequences in individuals who take cocaine socially, and the results are alarming.

"This is the first study in Australia to examine the cardiovascular effects of cocaine use in non-addict individuals who consider themselves 'social'

users.

"Our research found that social cocaine users had higher blood pressure, stiffer arteries, and heavier hearts, which are all associated with poor cardiovascular health in the long term.

"We have seen a number of young adults suffering heart attacks after cocaine use, with irreversible damage to their heart muscle and substantial impact on their quality of life thereafter.

"While some people who use cocaine recreationally may not think that they are doing their body a lot of harm, our results show this is not the case, and that cocaine is dangerous for your health even when taken socially.

"Our research highlights the dangers of cocaine use, even in a social setting. These findings have important implications for public health," Professor Figtree said.

According to the Illicit Drug Data Report 2012-2013, there was a record number of cocaine seizures last financial year. In NSW, cocaine seizures were higher than any other state.

The Australian 2010 National Drug Strategy Household Survey report, states 7.8 per cent of Australians aged 18 and over had used cocaine in their lifetime. Users were predominantly male, aged 20-39 years, currently employed with post-school qualifications, living in major cities, and of the highest socioeconomic status.

Paper lead author Dr Rebecca Kozor, Sydney Medical School, said that cocaine use is common across a wide demographic in Sydney and Australia.

"In Australia, studies examining cocaine users across the Sydney metropolitan area have identified two distinct groups of users - a group with a higher socio-economic status (SES) and a group with a lower socio-economic status," she said.

"The lower SES group had lower levels of education, higher unemployment, were more criminally active, and had higher levels of cocaine use and diagnosis of [cocaine dependence](#). "These users preferred injecting as the means of cocaine administration, and more frequently used cocaine in combination with heroin.

"The higher SES users had regular or above average incomes and reported quite a different usage profile - typically taking cocaine intranasally, usually in conjunction with alcohol, on a recreational basis, and consider themselves social users rather than addicts.

"Despite high levels of education, some individuals and professionals are unaware of the acute and long term effects of cocaine use.

"The demonstrated adverse effects on long-term [cardiovascular health](#) such as increased [blood pressure](#), arterial stiffness and cardiac mass suggest that cocaine use does not just cause acute consequences, but also increases long term cardiovascular morbidity (heart attacks, strokes) and mortality.

"With [cardiovascular disease](#) being a leading cause of death in Australia, people need to be aware of the dangers of social [cocaine](#) use on their long term health," Dr Kozor said.

More information: Kozor R, Grieve SM, Buchholz S, Kaye S, Darke S, et al. (2014) "Regular Cocaine Use Is Associated with Increased Systolic Blood Pressure, Aortic Stiffness and Left Ventricular Mass in Young Otherwise Healthy Individuals." *PLoS ONE* 9(4): e89710. [DOI:](#)

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