

# Center for Behavioral Health Studies

## Women and Crack Cocaine Abuse

### The Problem

Cocaine abuse and addiction continues to be a problem that plagues our nation. By 1999, an estimated 1.7 million Americans, age 12 and older, were chronic cocaine users.

It was in the mid-1980's that crack or rock cocaine, a smokeable cocaine compound, was first introduced. **Crack is the street name given to the freebase form of cocaine that has been processed from the powdered cocaine hydrochloride form to a smokable substance.**

### Crack Addiction

The term "**crack**" refers to the crackling sound heard when the mixture is smoked. Crack cocaine is processed with ammonia or sodium bicarbonate (baking soda) and water, and heated to remove the hydrochloride. **Crack is an inexpensive, highly addictive form of cocaine, proving itself especially attractive to women.** Its popularity has been attributed to its rapid onset and potency, low price, ready availability, and non-invasive route of administration.

Crack smoking has been associated with increased risk of heterosexual HIV transmission, because of the exchange of sex for crack or money. Traditional treatment methods, designed primarily for male heroin and alcohol abusers have been less successful in treating women for crack addiction.

**Two decades after its introduction, crack cocaine is still a major drug of abuse.** Admissions to publicly-funded treatment programs suggest that while the population of women seeking treatment for smoked cocaine is growing older, many young women continue to be introduced to the drug.

### Demographics/Trends

The number of admissions for adult women (age 18 or older) to substance abuse treatment for smoked cocaine use peaked in 1994. Since then the number of women entering substance abuse treatment for the first time has declined slightly. The majority of women in treatment (69 percent) have had at least one other treatment experience.

In 1998, the average adult woman entering treatment for crack cocaine was 34 years old and had first used crack when she was 24. Of the adult women entering treatment for cocaine abuse, about one-third were white, while 61% were black and 5% were Hispanic. Over time, the proportions of women 35 years and older entering treatment has increased significantly from 19 percent in 1992 to 43 percent in 1998.



### Duration of Use

The number of women with long-term use of smoked cocaine has increased as the crack epidemic has extended over time. In 1992, 50 percent of adult women in a NIDA study had been smoking cocaine for more than five years. By 1998, however, 42 percent had been using for 11 years or more.

Among women entering treatment, the ready availability of crack cocaine is evident in the large numbers of women who began smoking cocaine in the 1980's, indicating long-term use of the drug.



**Secondary Drugs**

**S**eventy percent of adult women entering treatment for smoked cocaine in 1998 reported other drug problems. Alcohol and marijuana were the most widely used, with 21 percent of women reporting problems with both. An additional 29 percent reported abuse of alcohol and no other drugs.

Cocaine abuse and addiction is a complex problem involving biological

changes in the brain as well as a myriad of social, familial, and environmental factors.

**In Summary**

**L**ike any successful treatment plan, cocaine treatment strategies must address the psychological, social and pharmacological aspects of the patients' drug abuse.

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