

## **Ketamine – a briefing for parents, carers and professionals**

### **What is ketamine?**

Ketamine is a short-acting but powerful dissociative anaesthetic drug: it reduces (or blocks) signals to the conscious mind from other parts of the brain and causes a temporary loss of body sensation. It is used medically during surgery on animals and humans.

Ketamine generally comes either in liquid form (which can be swallowed or injected) or, more common amongst young people, as a grainy white (or off-white) powder, which is snorted. It may also come in tablet form.

### **Is ketamine illegal?**

Yes: ketamine became a Class C controlled substance in 2006. The maximum penalty for possession is two years in prison or an unlimited fine (or both). The maximum penalty for supply is 14 years in prison or an unlimited fine (or both).

### **What are the effects of ketamine?**

At low doses the user may feel euphoric and experience rushes or waves of energy. At higher doses ketamine has powerful hallucinogenic qualities: users can experience distortion of reality and perceptual changes. In addition, users can feel they are detached from themselves and others around them and may have a 'floating' feeling, as if the mind and body have been separated.

Users can also experience severely reduced bodily sensation, loss of co-ordination, muscle rigidity and a sense of invulnerability, meaning they may exhibit aggressive / violent behaviour, slurred or blocked speech, exaggerated sense of strength, or a blank stare.

The initial high can last for up to an hour; subsequent after-effects can sometimes be felt for several hours later.

### **How dangerous is ketamine?**

Recreational use of ketamine can cause serious injury, through unconsciousness, potential respiratory collapse or heart failure. Side effects can include vomiting, convulsions, damage to the urinary tract (causing pain when urinating), and stomach cramps. Harms increase considerably at higher doses.

The main physical dangers stem from the context of use: **ketamine's anaesthetic qualities leave the taker far more helpless than most recreational drugs, and therefore highly vulnerable to accident or injury, sexual assault or exploitation.**

**Ketamine is especially dangerous when used alongside depressant drugs, including alcohol:** this can cause heart failure, stop breathing or cause someone to choke to death on their own vomit if they're sick whilst unconscious.

### How dangerous is ketamine? (cont.)

**Ketamine is also very dangerous if used with stimulants like mephedrone, MDMA, cocaine or speed:** this increases heart pressure, which can cause seizures, fits or heart attacks.

Ketamine can also cause panic attacks, depression and in large doses can exaggerate pre-existing mental health problems.

Long-term users risk permanent damage to the bladder and kidneys.

Injecting users risk exposure to blood-borne viruses such as Hepatitis C or HIV. Those who share straws/banknotes to snort powder can also be at risk of contracting Hepatitis C.

### Is ketamine addictive?

Ketamine use does not lead to physical dependence, but is associated with a powerful psychological dependence, similar to cocaine. Tolerance can develop quickly, whereby more of the drug is required to achieve the same effect.

### How will I know if a young person is using ketamine?

- They may use the terms 'k', 'special k', 'super k', 'vitamin k', 'green', 'kit kat' (all slang for ketamine); 'k-land' or 'k-hole' (slang for the ketamine experience)
- They may describe incidents in which they and their friends inflict pain on each other as part of a game [due to ketamine's anaesthetic effects]; or out-of-body experiences, or experiences in which they are flying or feel able to look down upon themselves from above
- They are in possession of white (or off-white) powder, packaged in a rectangular card/paper wrap or small plastic re-sealable bag; or what look like medical bottles of clear liquid; or unidentified tablets [NB: it is possible that any such powder or tablets could be other illegal, or prescription, drugs. Never attempt to taste / analyse an unknown substance – contact the police and/or relevant care professionals]
- They appear so intoxicated that they cannot control the use of their limbs, are slurring their speech or appear anaesthetised [NB: it is possible that this may be the result of using other drugs and/or alcohol. In a medical emergency, dial 999 for an ambulance and send for a first-aider]

### What should I do if I suspect a young person is using ketamine?

Try to engage them in conversation about their use and explain the dangers and potential consequences of using ketamine. Professionals can complete the Substance Misuse Screening Tool with them – it is likely that this will indicate a referral to Ru-ok? If the young person consents to this referral, complete a referral form and fax it to Ru-ok?

If the young person does not consent to a referral (or refuses to engage in conversation / screening) work with their resistance and contact Ru-ok? for support and guidance.

Ru-ok? can also support parents, carers and other family members to engage with young people around their Ketamine use – please call 01273 293966 for assistance.

This briefing was produced by ru-ok? in February 2009 and updated in April 2010 and uses information taken from [www.drugscope.org.uk](http://www.drugscope.org.uk), [www.talktofrank.com](http://www.talktofrank.com) and [www.streetdrugs.org](http://www.streetdrugs.org).