Ketamine use is increasing, and so are its harms

*Information and advice for educational settings

BACKGROUND

Ketamine use has increased in recent years and so have the related health harms. People now use ketamine in many different contexts, from party settings to self-medication. There are eight times more people going into drug treatment for ketamine use than there were a decade ago. People aged 18-24 have the highest rates of use.

Sustained ketamine use can cause painful bladder problems and damage to the urinary tract, leading to incontinence and other complications, some of which can be irreversible. This is an increasing cause for concern among urologists.

KEY FACTS

- Ketamine is a medicine used in anaesthesia and for its pain-relieving properties. One form of ketamine is licensed for the treatment of some types of depression in the UK, but it's not prescribed by the NHS.
- Street ketamine is produced and smuggled illegally into the UK and does not have the consistency and safety of medical ketamine.
- At the time of publication ketamine was a Class B drug, which means it's illegal to possess and supply. Possession has a penalty of up to 5 years in prison, an unlimited fine or both. The government has asked for advice on reclassifying ketamine to Class A, which could increase the penalties.
- People take ketamine for different reasons: for partying, to self-medicate for pain or mental health issues, or to experiment with altered states of consciousness. People who use ketamine are typically in their 20s but, according to the last school survey, the use of ketamine in children, although low compared to cannabis or alcohol, has more than doubled in five years.
- Common negative effects of using ketamine include memory problems, hallucinations, confusion, dissociation (feeling disconnected from yourself, your thoughts and your feelings), nausea, agitation, and depression. High doses can induce the so-called 'K-hole' or severe dissociation causing detachment from reality. This is typically an unpleasant experience that temporarily paralyses the person and puts them at risk of assault or accidents. Frequent use of ketamine causes dependence.
- Sustained ketamine use causes serious bladder damage, which can be irreversible. Chronic abdominal pain ('K cramps'). Other symptoms like frequent urination, incontinence, or blood in urine, can affect people who have been taking ketamine for a sustained period. Sometimes people keep using ketamine just to alleviate the pain this has caused, which can in turn, worsen the problem. The worst cases can end up with people having their bladder removed, and with a life-threatening risk of kidney or liver failure. However, if stopped in time, much of the damage can often be reversed.

ACTIONS TO CONSIDER AT EDUCATIONAL SETTINGS

- Include **education** about the risk of ketamine as part of **RSHE curriculum when teaching about drugs.**
- Ensure **staff are alert** to risks of ketamine use. They should pay special attention to unexplained bladder damage symptoms and have clear guidelines on how to approach students and respond to parents.
- Schools are required by law to have a **behaviour policy** which outlines effective strategies that will encourage good behaviour. Guidance is available to support school leaders and staff with managing behaviour.
- Schools and colleges should continue to have regard to Keeping children safe in education which is the statutory guidance. If a child has been harmed or is at risk of harm a referral should be made to children's social care immediately (and if appropriate the police).
- Have clear referral arrangements with your **local children and young people's specialist** and your **adult drug and alcohol service**, for children or adults who need any help, support or specialist advice in relation to drug use. You can find your local service at Find drug and alcohol support near you | FRANK.
- Know where to refer **concerned parents** for support. Most **local adult and children and young people's drug services** offer support for parents, and further advice and support for parents is available from ADFAM to drug treatment and mental health services. You can find drug and alcohol treatment services in your area at Find drug and alcohol support near you | FRANK and more information for parents can be found at Advice for parents & carers | FRANK.
- Work closely with your local authority's **Public Health Teams**, to stay connected to other stakeholders, such as health and social care services, police, drug and alcohol treatment services and other education partners (schools, further/higher education, universities, etc.).
- Every local authority has a **Local Drug Information System (LDIS)** that collects and spreads information on drug-related incidents in the area. Knowing about incidents that can affect your institution can help you be prepared. Likewise, informing of any incident in your institution will help others prepare.
- **Higher education settings,** especially universities, should seek to ensure that students have the resources, support and knowledge needed to make informed choices on drugs and reduce harm, especially in relation to ketamine, given its common use among university students. This can include support from the university's welfare, counselling and mental health services, local GPs services, and or the students' union advice services. Staff should be aware of ketamine harms and of referral pathways to meet need.
- If someone is unwell, don't hesitate to get help. Call **111 and 999** if you think it's life-threatening. It is important the person who is feeling unwell is honest with any first responders about what they have taken.

INFORMATION AND RESOURCES

- FRANK offers easy to read information on the risks of using ketamine (https://www.talktofrank.com/drug/ketamine) and mixing it with other substances.
- FRANK has a local drug and alcohol services directory: Find drug and alcohol support near you | FRANK
- People, including teachers, parents and children and young people can also call FRANK on 0800 776600 or at www.talktofrank.com to find out more and get support
- Information on ketamine bladder syndrome and its management: British Association of Urological Surgeons consensus statements on the management of ketamine uropathy
- NHS advice on contacting urgent and emergency care services: Find urgent and emergency care services - NHS

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The British Association of Urological Surgeons