

**Ketamine: A New Drug of Abuse  
A Quick Overview**

**Blair Stott MD St. Vincent Hospital and Health Services**

❖ **What is it?**

Ketamine is an anesthetic drug that is legal for use by medical professionals in the United States. It's in a class of drugs known as "dissociative anesthetics," which means that it works by disconnecting the mind from the rest of the body. If used properly, it does not make the patient unconscious, it simply makes them unaware of their environment. This situation can be very advantageous because it means the patient has very little depression of their cardiovascular system during anesthesia. In fact, it actually causes a release of the body's stored adrenaline, which helps to maintain blood pressure. This property makes the drug very useful in certain patients who cannot tolerate the drop in blood pressure that usually occurs under other types of anesthesia. However, the profound changes in perception, hallucinations, and lack of pain that occur during the dissociative state, known by the abuser as "K-Land," makes this drug and its effects desirable to some people.

❖ **What are its street names?**

Special K, K, Ket, Vitamin K, Kit Kat, Cat Valium, Super acid, among others.

❖ **Where does it come from?**

Ketamine is very difficult to manufacture, however, there is a vast supply across the nation, stored in hospitals, dentist's and veterinarian's offices. Most drug dealers get the drug by robbing these locations.

❖ **How is it used?**

Ketamine is produced in a liquid, and can be injected intravenously, however, it is very potent, and one can very easily overdose by injecting only slightly too much. There are many reports of users passing out before even finishing the injection. Therefore, it is usually boiled down into a powder by the dealer, who then sells it in pill form for ingestion or as a powder that is sniffed.

❖ **Where and why is it used?**

Ketamine is very popular at nightclubs and rave parties. This fact makes abuse of the drug quite dangerous, not so much because of the dangers of the drug itself, which will be discussed below, but because of a phenomenon at these parties called "cafeteria use." Cafeteria use is drug slang for mixing several different drugs into a single pill. The "cafeteria" pills are often sold to the user under the false assumption that it contains only one substance. But because certain mixtures of drugs can be extremely deadly, the potential to unintentionally overdose is very high. Ketamine is abused because of the dissociative effects that occur with use of the drug. Ketamine gives the effect of an out-of-body or near death experience, which certain people desire because they feel it changes the way they view life and the universe. Also, since it makes the user unaware of his or her environment, and is tasteless and odorless, it is often used as a date rape drug by slipping it into someone's drink.

❖ **What are its effects and immediate side effects?**

Neurologic: Ketamine causes sedation, hallucinations, anxiety, paranoia, psychosis, and seizures. The high that occurs with ketamine typically lasts from 1-4 hours depending on the dose. Patients emerging from a "high" can have delirium, hallucinations, and very terrifying nightmares for up to four days after a single dose of ketamine.

Cardiovascular: As mentioned above, ketamine increases blood pressure and heart rate. Blood pressure can become high enough to flood the lungs with fluid, causing the patient to drown to death. It has also been shown to increase mucus secretion in the airways, which makes this drug very dangerous for use by people who have asthma. Finally, blood pressure can become so high that it can cause strokes in otherwise healthy people. Documented deaths have occurred in people using ketamine from all of the above mentioned causes.

Respiratory: Ketamine is perhaps most dangerous because of its effects on the lungs. At doses above one gram, ketamine can cause respiratory arrest. In other words, the brain stops telling the lungs to breath, and the user suffocates to death. It is worth noting that the dose used to get high is around 100- 300 mg. That means that taking only as much as three times the needed dose, either intentionally or unintentionally, can kill you.

Finally, one other very important side effect is the well-documented “feeling of invincibility” that ketamine produces. Coupled with the fact that, as an anesthetic, it stops the user from feeling pain, it makes the user very likely to participate in dangerous and harmful activity. In fact, most cases of ketamine abuse and death occur because of the actions of the user while on the drug, such as jumping from moving cars, jumping off buildings, attacking large animals, etc.

#### ❖ **What are the long-term side effects?**

Since ketamine is such a new drug of abuse, few studies have been performed assessing the long-term effects of abuse. But it is clear that, as with other hallucinogenic drugs, a psychological dependence can occur. In other words, the user begins to feel they cannot live without the drug, and seeks only to experience the altered state produced by the drug. This leads to greater and more frequent use. Plus, a recent study has shown that certain similar drugs, such as PCP (known as angel dust) do cause brain damage with chronic use.

#### ❖ **How can you recognize someone on ketamine and what is the treatment?**

Unfortunately, like so many other drugs, there are no specific signs of ketamine abuse. The most common things to occur are behavioral disturbances such as aggressiveness and hostility, changes in friends and habits, and a general lack of interest in relationships and withdrawal from social settings. The treatment is very simple, STOP USING THE DRUG. This often requires an intervention by friends and loved ones, rehab counseling, antipsychotic medications to control delusions and hallucinations, and avoiding the settings where the drug is common.

#### ❖ **Further Resources**

1. Drug Enforcement Administration  
[http://www.usdoj.gov/dea/resources/parents\\_teachers.html](http://www.usdoj.gov/dea/resources/parents_teachers.html)
2. Patents: The Anti-Drug  
<http://www.theantidrug.com/index.html>
3. Indiana Poison Center  
Phone: (317) 962- 2335  
<http://www.clarian.org/clinical/poisoncontrol>