Cocaine — When did people start "taking" it? [1]

Dear Alice,
When was the first time documented that people were "taking" cocaine?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Cocaine use dates back long before Eric Clapton's famous song [2] came out in the 1970s. An illegal drug in the United States and many other countries around the world, cocaine has been used in the past for a variety of purposes. Its rich history shows an evolution from food to medicine to illicit drug, with scientists discovering along the way the many harmful consequences that can accompany cocaine use. For more specifics about the effects and addictive properties of cocaine, you can check out the related Q&A Cocaine [3].

About 4,000 years ago, long before cocaine was the refined, purified stimulant it is today, its source (the coca plant) was used as a food substitute during difficult agricultural periods caused by tribal wars in Central and South America. This is the region in which coca plants are native. Interestingly, nutritional analyses have revealed that the leaves contain carbohydrates, protein, calcium, iron, phosphorus, and vitamins A, B, C, and E. However, the purified cocaine used as a drug today does not contain the nutritional benefits of the coca leaves because the active ingredient — cocaine hydrochloride — has been refined and the rest discarded.

One population in particular, the Peruvian Amara Indians have been documented as using coca (by chewing the leaves) for over a thousand years with few physical consequences (due to the low concentration of active ingredients in the leaves, paired with the limitations of how many leaves a person can chew — even the most persistent chewer can only gnaw on a limited number of leaves). Additionally, Inca traditional healers used coca leaves medicinally to treat various illnesses — and also as an aphrodisiac. When the Spanish explorers arrived in the Americas, they were first skeptical of the use of coca (they actually considered it evil) but then they discovered its economic potential. They observed Native Americans using coca leaves to increase worker efficiency in the high altitudes of the silver mines, and by the mid-1500s the King of Spain had officially approved its use by native workers. Using the tax collected from the coca sales to construct buildings, such as churches, provided an additional economic benefit.
The active ingredient from the coca plant was not isolated until 1860, when Albert Niemann, a German chemist, successfully separated cocaine hydrochloride from the rest of the leaf. This marked a turning point in the history of cocaine because the cocaine hydrochloride could now be used as an ingredient in food and medicines. From its European debut as a wine additive (in a drink called Vin Mariani) to the American creation of Coca-Cola (originally concocted by pharmacist John Styth Pemberton), the refining process improved.

Sigmund Freud, called the “founding father of psychoanalysis,” touted cocaine as a miracle drug. Merck, a German pharmaceutical company, began mass-producing cocaine to use as a local anesthetic. By the late 1800s, cocaine had become an important trade commodity, with coca plants being grown in Asia and the active ingredient being produced mostly by pharmaceutical companies. As the increasingly refined cocaine form was being ingested, its harmful effects — including severe addiction and cardiovascular problems — became more apparent. Essentially, as people were ingesting larger quantities of the active ingredient (made possible by improved purification technologies), physical, psychological, and social consequences also increased.

By the early 1900s, cocaine abuse became a pressing concern. Starting in New York and soon spreading across most parts of the United States, cocaine use was legally restricted and mandatory drug education was implemented in public schools. During World War I, the United Kingdom saw many of its soldiers returning from war with cocaine addictions and followed suit in banning its use. Of course, just because something is made illegal does not mean people will stop using it. Additionally, crack cocaine, a smokable form of cocaine developed in the twentieth century, has a much higher concentration of the drug than the type of cocaine that is snorted, often resulting in more serious health consequences.

Despite its long history, cocaine in its current forms poses the potential for serious health consequences. To learn more about the drug and addressing cocaine use for yourself, a friend, or a family member, please check out the related Q&As below. You can also search through the Go Ask Alice! Cocaine, Speed, & Other Stimulants [4] archive for additional information.

Hope this history lesson proves helpful!

Alice!
Category:
Alcohol & Other Drugs [5]
Cocaine, Speed, & Other Stimulants [6]

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