

Fact Sheet

Ketamine

AKA: *K, Special K, Super K, Vitamin K, Ketalar, Ketaset*

SOURCE: Imported from Asia and increasingly the Middle East. A small amount is diverted from hospital or veterinary supplies. Some European manufacture alleged.

APPEARANCE: White powder or ampoules for injection. Branded vials may be marked "Ketalar" or "Ketaset." Also appears in many tablets passed off as Ecstasy.

COST: Highly variable; £10-40/g reported

QUALITY: Variable; when sold in tablets it is often mixed with a stimulant to give an ersatz ecstasy-like effect (speedy and trippy). Powders may well have been adulterated, though often this will have been with an inert bulking agent.

More often than not, it is other products which have been adulterated with ketamine, rather than ketamine itself being adulterated. So low grade cannabis resin (*soap*), heroin and Ecstasy is sometimes cut with ketamine,

METHODS of USE: Ketamine powder is usually snorted or swallowed though some people do inject it. Ampoules are typically injected.

EFFECTS: Ketamine is described as a "disassociate anaesthetic." It interferes with signalling between brain and body, reducing awareness and sensitivity to pain, but also inhibiting movement.

At lower doses, users report feeling disorientated, with some hallucinogenic experiences such as distorted senses of the body and limbs feeling longer or shorter. Some people feel euphoric, Limbs may feel heavy and increased effort is required to move or speak,

At higher doses, hallucinations are much more pronounced. People describe an experience that has been dubbed "k-holing:" a feeling as though travelling along a tunnel towards a white light. Perceptions can become very altered with intensely altered awareness of sound and vision. Some users report intense "out-of-body" experiences which can be profound and a small number of ketamine users seek out this aspect of ketamine use.

People can feel very paralysed and find movement difficult or impossible. Some people report that the hallucinations experienced on Ketamine feel far more "real" than with LSD or magic mushrooms.

Effects are highly dose-dependent and also by other substances taken.

HEALTH IMPLICATIONS: Some users feel nauseous and there is a risk of choking on vomit. Ketamine does not suppress heart rate or breathing to a very great extent. So while people may become drowsy or possibly unconscious, the risks of this are lower than with other depressants.

The depressant effects of ketamine are exacerbated by taking it in combination with alcohol, opiates or benzodiazepines.

A bigger risk is that users can injure themselves while disorientated, and careful supervision of people who are heavily intoxicated is important. This is especially dangerous when Ketamine is combined with stimulants such as cocaine or amphetamines.

Some users can find the powerful hallucinogenic effects of ketamine very disorientating and find the experience very unpleasant.

There is a lack of definitive evidence relating to long term mental or physical health risks, but as with other psychoactive substances, their use by people concerned about their mental health should be approached with caution.

HARM REDUCTION STRATEGIES: Ketamine is liable to cause disorientation and could leave people vulnerable. So if it is going to be used, it would be better to avoid unfamiliar, crowded or hazardous environments. Use in club settings, squat parties or festivals are especially risky in terms of injury or risk of assault. Given the risk of injury, falls, or becoming nauseous, having a trusted friend to act as a sitter is a useful risk-reduction strategy. They should be able to put the person in the recovery position and if necessary call an ambulance.

Some ketamine users find the hallucinatory experience enthralling, while others may find it scary. It may act to exacerbate fears and low moods so is best avoided if the person is feeling anxious or depressed. Should the user experience panic or anxiety, the presence of a reassuring sitter who can calm the user may help.

Unlike most other hallucinogens, lots of people find the Ketamine experience more "immersive" in that it feels very real at the time. While for some this is part of the appeal, for others this makes the experience more scary.

Unfortunately, a lot of people first take Ketamine accidentally. Typically this is from taking powder or pills, thinking it is MDMA (or cocaine.) The real clues that this has happened are the heaviness of the limbs and difficulty in talking described above. If you think that you have had ketamine in error, get yourself in to an environment where you feel safe, with a trusted friend as soon as possible or seek medical help.

LEGAL STATUS: Ketamine has been a Controlled Drug (Class C, Schedule 4i) since January 2006. This makes unlawful possession and supply a criminal offence, carrying a maximum of 14 years for supply.

OTHER INFORMATION: Ketamine is not a new drug, nor is it a "horse tranquilliser" as it is often dubbed by the media and users. It is an anaesthetic and it is used for animals, very young children and patients where there is a high risk of respiratory failure.

Ketamine is similar in effect to Phencyclidine (PCP, angeldust, Sernyl).

Ketamine grew in popularity in the club scene. Some relate this to a decline in the quality of Ecstasy; clubbers in search of an Ecstasy-like buzz used combinations of Ketamine with other drugs to get a hallucinogenic, speedy effect. Ketamine reached relatively high levels of popularity in 1999-2000, especially in squat/warehouse scenes.

Since then its popularity has waned somewhat. Probably because of too many parties where people lay around paralysed, unable to walk or talk.

However, despite being less popular in the club scene, and changes to the law making it a controlled drug Ketamine has remained stubbornly popular, and shows no signs of vanishing from the drug scene altogether.