# Ketamine addiction rises amid growing use for psychiatric treatment



Ketamine, a drug increasingly recognised for its potential in psychiatric treatment, is also driving a notable rise in addiction and health complications, according to recent research involving hundreds of self-identified ketamine addicts. The findings highlight a complex paradox surrounding ketamine's growing use in both medical and recreational settings.

Ketamine, once predominantly a niche party drug, has surged into mainstream popularity, particularly among young adults in their 20s. This rise has been accompanied by growing concerns regarding its safety, addiction potential, and physical health effects. Notable public figures, including actor Matthew Perry and drag artist The Vivienne, have recently died from complications related to ketamine use, drawing heightened attention to the issue.

While medically administered ketamine is carefully regulated and used under professional supervision primarily for conditions such as treatment-resistant depression, recreational ketamine is often illicit, unregulated, and poses greater risks due to contamination and unpredictable purity. The nasal spray Spravato, containing ketamine, is approved as a standalone therapy for treatment-resistant depression, and phase three clinical trials are exploring ketamine’s use for alcohol dependency. Despite these advances, the illegal, recreational use of ketamine in social and nightlife environments has prompted public health concerns.

A collaborative research effort by the University of Exeter and University College London surveyed 274 individuals across Europe, North America, and Australia who identify as struggling with ketamine addiction. This survey represents one of the most comprehensive datasets on the personal impacts of ketamine addiction to date. Among the findings, 60% of respondents reported bladder problems, a well-documented side effect in chronic users but rarely discussed widely. Physical symptoms such as kidney damage, abdominal cramps commonly referred to as "K cramps," and cardiac complications were also noted.

Participants described a range of intense psychological impacts including cravings, anxiety, low mood, and irritability. Some compared ketamine's addictive and social consequences to those seen with opioids, with one person describing it as “the heroin of a generation.” Despite these severe effects, over a third of those surveyed had never sought treatment. Of those who did, only about 36% expressed satisfaction with the care received. One participant commented, “I think they need to research drugs or options that fight K bladder, K kidneys and K stomach cramps. Ketamine can make your lifespan much shorter.”

A recurring theme in the responses was a frustration with the lack of awareness about ketamine’s risks among peers, educators, healthcare providers, and even addiction specialists. Many expressed that education on ketamine’s effects should be more accessible and widespread. “No one even understands what ketamine is or what it does,” one participant said. “It shouldn’t be our job to explain the science. It should be taught. People need to be educated. There’s so much less information out there compared to drugs like cocaine.”

While many people encounter ketamine recreationally, only a small minority first used it under medical supervision, a situation mostly seen in the US where at-home ketamine therapy has become more common. In the UK, ketamine use remains strictly controlled within clinical settings. The doses taken recreationally are typically much higher than those administered medically, which contributes to rapid tolerance and escalating use.

The UK government is reportedly considering reclassifying ketamine as a Class A drug in response to its rising recreational use and related fatalities. However, previous reclassification from Class C to Class B in 2014 led to a significant increase in ketamine use among young adults, indicating that harsher legal penalties may not effectively reduce demand.

The study emphasises the urgent need for new treatment strategies targeting both the physical effects and psychological addiction to ketamine. These include developing pharmacological interventions to alleviate symptoms such as severe abdominal pain and bladder damage, alongside improving public and professional education about ketamine’s risks.

Rebecca Harding, a PhD candidate at University College London, and Celia Morgan, a professor at the University of Exeter, who led the research, advocate for expanding treatment access, reducing stigma, and investing in research to better understand ketamine addiction and prevention. Their study provides an important platform for the voices of those affected and aims to guide future policy, clinical care, and public health initiatives.

The Independent reports that the rising popularity of ketamine, while offering new therapeutic possibilities, also poses significant challenges due to its potential for addiction and physical harm, underscoring the need for balanced approaches in policy and healthcare.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

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