# UK hospitals see surge in cocaine use among pensioners, raising public health concerns



Hospitals across the UK are witnessing an alarming rise in elderly patients being admitted for cocaine-related issues, highlighting a troubling new trend among pensioners. Between March 2023 and March 2024, NHS data revealed that 723 people aged 65 and older were hospitalised due to cocaine use, marking a one-third increase compared to the previous year and a more than fourfold rise from 2014-15 when only 164 cases were recorded. Disturbingly, this group included 70 individuals aged 75-79, 28 in their 80s, and eight nonagenarians, signalling substance misuse well into advanced age.

Such admissions are not solely due to recreational use; many older adults reportedly turn to cocaine as a means to self-medicate for chronic ailments inadequately addressed by the NHS. Alongside treatment for addiction, healthcare providers are seeing pensioners requiring help with withdrawal symptoms, depression, and cocaine-induced psychosis. Yet despite making up a mere 3% of the 23,644 cocaine-related hospital cases, the steep upward trend poses significant concern for public health services.

Experts suggest several drivers behind this pattern. Zaheen Ahmed from UK Addiction Treatment (UKAT) noted that some older adults experiment with cocaine because they may have more disposable income, fewer daily responsibilities, and more free time. Others use the drug to cope with loneliness, bereavement, or mental health challenges linked to aging. Moreover, some individuals who previously used cocaine in their youth are returning to it, often unaware that age-related health issues and concurrent medication amplify the drug’s dangers dramatically.

The broader context underscores the UK’s entrenched problem with cocaine. The country holds the unenviable position as Europe’s cocaine capital, with 2.7% of adults aged 15 to 64 using the drug annually—higher even than nations traditionally associated with cocaine like Mexico and Colombia. This statistic is reinforced by multiple studies, including one cited by the Evening Standard which ranks the UK second only to Australia in global cocaine consumption. The drug’s increased availability, high purity, and affordability contribute heavily to this widespread use. In fact, some users can purchase a night's supply for as little as £10, making cocaine as accessible as ordering a takeaway pizza.

These factors not only affect younger demographics but have increasingly permeated older populations. NHS Digital figures from 2018 highlighted a fivefold increase over a decade in cocaine-related admissions among those aged 90 and above, mirroring the broader rise among senior citizens. Experts attribute this partly to longer life expectancies, improved drug purity, and reduced prices encouraging continued or renewed use even at advanced ages.

The serious health implications of cocaine use cannot be overstated. The drug is a potent stimulant affecting the central nervous system, with immediate euphoric effects but significant risks including anxiety, paranoia, and high potential for addiction. In England and Wales alone, 777 deaths were recorded in 2020 due to cocaine poisoning. Possession remains a severe criminal offence under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, with penalties reaching up to seven years imprisonment.

This distressing increase in elderly cocaine users adds urgency to calls for tailored intervention strategies. Beyond the immediate medical needs, addressing the social isolation, mental health issues, and underlying causes driving older adults toward cocaine will be essential. Public health officials and addiction experts alike stress that as the UK grapples with its place as a global leader in cocaine use, support systems must evolve to reflect the drug’s reach across all age groups, including the pensioner population.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/2117501/pensioners-hospitalised-snorting-cocaine), [[2]](https://www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/pensioners-aged-90-and-over-being-admitted-to-hospital-over-cocaine-use-a4283386.html)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/2117501/pensioners-hospitalised-snorting-cocaine)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/2117501/pensioners-hospitalised-snorting-cocaine), [[2]](https://www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/pensioners-aged-90-and-over-being-admitted-to-hospital-over-cocaine-use-a4283386.html)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/2117501/pensioners-hospitalised-snorting-cocaine), [[3]](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/12/22/britain-has-worst-cocaine-habit-in-europe-figures-show/), [[4]](https://www.standard.co.uk/news/health/cocaine-health-europe-drugs-study-b1128801.html)
* Paragraph 5 – [[2]](https://www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/pensioners-aged-90-and-over-being-admitted-to-hospital-over-cocaine-use-a4283386.html), [[1]](https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/2117501/pensioners-hospitalised-snorting-cocaine)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/2117501/pensioners-hospitalised-snorting-cocaine), [[6]](https://www.castlecraig.co.uk/addiction-resources/cocaine-facts-statistics/)
* Paragraph 7 – [[1]](https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/2117501/pensioners-hospitalised-snorting-cocaine), [[2]](https://www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/pensioners-aged-90-and-over-being-admitted-to-hospital-over-cocaine-use-a4283386.html), [[7]](https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/opiate-and-crack-cocaine-use-prevalence-estimates)

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

## Bibliography

1. <https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/2117501/pensioners-hospitalised-snorting-cocaine> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/uk/pensioners-aged-90-and-over-being-admitted-to-hospital-over-cocaine-use-a4283386.html> - An article from the London Evening Standard reports that NHS Digital figures revealed ten individuals aged 90 and over were admitted to hospital in 2018 due to cocaine use, a fivefold increase from a decade prior. The piece highlights a significant rise in cocaine-related hospital admissions among the elderly, with the number of people aged 60 and over treated for cocaine-related disorders increasing from 45 to 379 annually over the past decade. Experts attribute this surge to longer life expectancies, increased purity, and reduced prices of the drug.
3. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2023/12/22/britain-has-worst-cocaine-habit-in-europe-figures-show/> - The Daily Telegraph reports that Britain has the highest rate of cocaine consumption in Europe, with 2.7% of adults aged 15 to 64 using the drug annually. This rate surpasses that of Mexico and Colombia, countries traditionally associated with high cocaine use. The article discusses the factors contributing to this trend, including the UK's binge drinking culture and the ease of obtaining cocaine, which is now as accessible as ordering a pizza.
4. <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/health/cocaine-health-europe-drugs-study-b1128801.html> - The Evening Standard highlights a study revealing that the UK is the second-largest consumer of cocaine globally, following Australia. The study indicates that 2.7% of adults in the UK use cocaine each year, with men being twice as likely to use it compared to women. Experts suggest that the drug's availability and affordability have contributed to its widespread use, with some individuals obtaining a night's supply for as little as £10.
5. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/sep/22/uk-had-highest-number-of-young-cocaine-users-in-europe-last-year-report> - The Guardian reports that, according to the EU drugs agency, more young adults in Britain took cocaine in 2018 than anywhere else in Europe, with 5.3% of individuals aged between 15 and 34 using the drug. The article discusses the unprecedented levels of cocaine availability across Europe and the increasing purity of the drug, raising concerns about the potential for harm.
6. <https://www.castlecraig.co.uk/addiction-resources/cocaine-facts-statistics/> - Castle Craig provides statistics on cocaine use, noting that there were 20 million users of cocaine globally in 2019, with the global quantity of the drug seized reaching a record high of approximately 1,300 tonnes, 9.6% higher than in 2018. The article also discusses the legal status of cocaine in the UK, where it is classified as a Class A drug under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971, carrying severe penalties for possession and supply.
7. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/opiate-and-crack-cocaine-use-prevalence-estimates> - The UK government's publication provides prevalence estimates of opiate and crack cocaine use in England, detailing the number and rates of people using these substances by age group, sex, and region. The data highlights the ongoing challenges in addressing drug misuse and the need for targeted interventions to reduce harm and support affected individuals.