



# UNDERSTANDING **KETAMINE USE:**

**A COMPASSIONATE GUIDE FOR PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS**

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## Contents

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>What is Ketamine? .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Is Ketamine Legal?.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Why Might Young People Be Using Ketamine? .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Behaviours and Effects .....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>How You Can Help as a Parent or Carer .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Harm Reduction: If They're Using, Help Them Stay Safer.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Safeguarding and When to Seek Help.....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>Helpful Resources .....</b>	<b>13</b>

## Introduction

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As parents and carers, it's natural to worry when you hear words like "ketamine" or see stories in the news about young people struggling with drug use. These worries often come from a place of love and a deep desire to protect your child from harm.

This guide is designed to help you better understand what ketamine is, why some young people may be using it, and—most importantly—how you can offer support without judgment. You don't need to have all the answers, but staying curious, connected, and compassionate can make all the difference.

## What is Ketamine?

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Ketamine is a powerful anaesthetic that has been used safely in medical and veterinary settings for decades. In recent years, it has also been explored as a treatment for severe depression and trauma-related conditions, but outside of clinical use, ketamine is increasingly used recreationally—particularly among young people.

### When taken recreationally, ketamine can:



**Induce feelings of disconnection or detachment (sometimes described as "floating" or being "out of body").**



**Alter perception of time, space, and the body.**



**Cause dream-like or hallucinogenic states.**



**Lead to temporary immobility or confusion in high doses (known as a "K-hole").**

Repeated use over time can have serious effects on the body, especially the bladder, kidneys, and digestive system. Some young people report urine issues or severe abdominal pain—what's sometimes referred to as "**ketamine bladder syndrome.**"

## How ketamine is commonly taken:



**A white powder or crystallised powder**



**Placed into a line or a bump\***



**Sniffed** either directly in the nose or via a straw or rolled up note



**"The drip"** (any powder which collects at the back of your throat) is then spat out – if needed

**A "Line" of Ketamine:** A larger amount, usually laid out in a straight line and snorted through a straw, note, or similar item.

**A "Bump" of Ketamine:** A small amount (like a "mini-sniff"), sometimes taken from a key, fingernail, or small scoop.

## Is Ketamine Legal?

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In the UK, ketamine is classified as a **Class B controlled substance** under the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971. This means:

- ❑ *It is illegal to possess, supply, or produce ketamine without a lawful prescription.*
- ❑ *Being caught with it can lead to up to 5 years in prison, an unlimited fine, or both.*
- ❑ *Supplying it (including giving it to someone else without medical authority) can carry up to 14 years in prison.*

## Why Might Young People Be Using Ketamine?

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While it's easy to assume that drug use is about rebellion or bad decisions, the truth is often more layered. Young people are navigating a world that can feel overwhelming, uncertain, and at times painful. Ketamine can offer a temporary escape or a sense of connection—for better or worse.

Here are some common reasons young people might try or use ketamine:



## CURIOSITY

**Young people are naturally curious and sometimes drawn to pushing boundaries. For some, ketamine feels like “just trying something new,” especially if they don’t see the risks as immediate.**



## CLUBBING AND SOCIAL

**Ketamine is often used at raves, parties, and festivals. It’s relatively cheap and can be passed around easily in powders or pills. For some, it’s part of group bonding and shared experiences.**



## CONNECT

**Teenagers and young adults are wired to seek connection and community. If peers are experimenting with substances, some may follow along to fit in or avoid feeling left out.**



## COPING

**For others, ketamine is a form of self-soothing. It can dull difficult emotions like anxiety, grief, or loneliness. Some young people may not even realise that they’re using it to manage inner distress—it just feels like “relief.”**

### Behaviours and Effects

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Understanding how ketamine might affect your child, or teenager can help you respond with insight and empathy. Not every young person will show obvious signs, and changes can often be subtle—especially in the early stages. But over time, ketamine use may start to impact how they think, feel, behave, and interact with others.

### Short-Term (Immediate) Effects After Using Ketamine

The immediate effects of ketamine can vary depending on dose, setting, whether it’s mixed with other substances, and the individual’s physical or emotional state.

**Behaviours or signs you might notice:**

<b>Appearing “zoned out” or unusually still.</b>	<b>Difficulty speaking clearly (slurred or slow speech).</b>	<b>Seeming uncoordinated, wobbly, or stumbling.</b>	<b>Dilated pupils or rapid eye movements.</b>
<b>Unusual body movements (stiff or jerky).</b>	<b>Slower reaction times or confusion.</b>	<b>Inappropriate laughter or appearing dreamy/detached.</b>	<b>Complaints of nausea, dizziness, or needing to lie down.</b>

In higher doses, a person may experience a “K-hole” – a state of intense dissociation where they may be non-responsive, unable to move, or speak coherently. This can look very alarming but usually passes after 30–60 minutes.

**Regular Use and Emerging Dependency**

If a young person is using ketamine regularly—especially to cope with emotional distress or as a social crutch—you may start to notice shifts in their mood, energy, or behaviour. These changes can build slowly over time.

**Emotional and behavioural signs:**

<b>Becoming more withdrawn or secretive.</b>	<b>Losing interest in school, hobbies, or friendships.</b>	<b>Mood swings, irritability, or flat emotional responses.</b>
<b>Sleeping more during the day or irregular sleep patterns.</b>	<b>Appearing spaced out or emotionally disconnected.</b>	<b>Lying about whereabouts, money, or possessions going missing.</b>

**Dependency indicators:**

Dependency means a person feels they need to keep using ketamine to feel normal or to cope. It can include physical cravings, emotional reliance, needing to use as a painkiller/medication and difficulty stopping. This is often what people mean when they talk about addiction—the urge to keep using even when it's causing problems. Some signs might include:

<b>Using ketamine multiple times a week or daily.</b>	<b>Talking about needing it to feel “normal” or cope.</b>	<b>Anxiety, restlessness, or low mood when not using.</b>
<b>Struggling to manage daily life or routines without it.</b>	<b>Needing higher doses to feel the same effect (tolerance).</b>	<b>Using it as a painkiller or medication.</b>

**Young people may not use the word “addicted” – but they might say things like:**

*“It’s the only thing that helps me shut my brain off.”*

*“I’m not using that much—just when I need to escape.”*

*“Everyone else does it, it’s no big deal.”*

As ketamine use becomes more prolonged, it can cause significant harm to both physical and mental health. Many of these issues can develop quietly and are sometimes misattributed to other causes (like stress, anxiety, or puberty).



**Physical health concerns:**

**Frequent urination – needing to pee urgently or often.**

**Pain when urinating or in the lower abdomen – a sign of ketamine bladder syndrome.**

**Incontinence or blood in the urine.**

**Nausea or stomach pain – especially after eating.**

**Weight loss or poor appetite.**

**Fatigue, low energy, or poor concentration.**

**Mental health concerns:**

**Increased anxiety, paranoia, or emotional numbness.**

**Low mood or depressive symptoms when not using.**

**Feeling disconnected from reality or memory problems.**

**Difficulty managing emotions or handling stress.**

Some young people experience **psychological dependency**, where they feel like they *need* ketamine to get through social situations, manage racing thoughts, or deal with difficult feelings. They might not see their use as a problem—even as physical or emotional symptoms worsen.

**It's important to note:**

- ❑ ***Some of these behaviours may overlap with normal adolescent changes, mental health issues, or other life stresses.***
- ❑ ***Not all young people using ketamine will show obvious signs of distress or harm.***
- ❑ ***Changes might be dismissed by the young person or attributed to “just being tired” or “having a rough day.”***

That's why maintaining open, calm, and non-judgemental conversations is so crucial. If a young person feels safe to talk, they're more likely to share what's really going on—whether it's substance use, peer pressure, or emotional pain underneath.

## How You Can Help as a Parent or Carer

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It can be hard not to panic when you find out your child might be using ketamine. But your reaction can shape how open they are with you moving forward. What they need most is to feel safe, heard, and loved.

### 1. Start from a Place of Curiosity, Not Fear

- ❑ Try not to lead with confrontation or punishment.
- ❑ **You could say:** *“I read something about ketamine recently and it made me curious—have you heard about it?” or “I know some young people are using it to cope with stuff—what do you think about that?”*

### 2. Stay Calm and Keep Listening

- ❑ Resist the urge to lecture. It’s okay to say you’re worried, but try to avoid shame-based language like *“you’re ruining your life”* or *“what were you thinking?”*
- ❑ **You might say:** *“You can tell me anything. I might not always understand right away, but I’ll try.”*

### 3. Offer Support Without Judgement

- ❑ Let them know you’re there for them—no matter what. That doesn’t mean you have to condone the behaviour, but you can still offer love and support alongside concern.
- ❑ **Say:** *“If you ever feel out of your depth or unsure about something, we can work it out together.”*

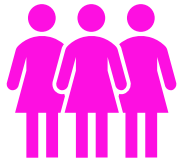
## Harm Reduction: If They’re Using, Help Them Stay Safer

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Harm reduction is an approach that focuses on keeping people safe, even if they’re using drugs. It includes practical steps to reduce the risk of overdose, injury, or long-term harm. Harm reduction doesn’t condone or encourage drug use; it simply recognises that some people do use and supports them to stay as safe and well as possible.

If your child is already using ketamine, the goal isn’t to scare them into stopping. It’s to help them stay as safe as possible while opening the door to longer-term conversations and support.

**Tips for Safer Use:**



**Don't use alone.**

It's safer to be with people who can help if something goes wrong.



**Start small.**

Effects can vary, especially if you accidentally use too much. You can always add more, you can't take it away once it is in your system.



**Don't mix.**

Mixing with alcohol, medication or other drugs can be very dangerous. If you are going to use, stick to just ketamine.



**Space out your use**

Regular use could cause lasting bladder/kidney damage. The more you space out, the less chance of it having long term impacts on you.



**Know the risks of the "K-hole".**

Using too much can lead to dissociation and inability to move or speak.



**Practical Advice**

Encourage them to carry their phone and let someone know where they are.

**Talk about consent, sexual safety, and staying with trusted friends.**

**Share resources, so they can hear from other voices too.**

## Safeguarding and When to Seek Help

There may be times when a young person's use becomes more serious or dangerous. Trust your instincts and don't be afraid to seek professional advice.

### Warning signs to look out for:

- ❑ *Dramatic changes in mood, sleep, or appetite*
- ❑ *Secretive or withdrawn behaviour.*
- ❑ *Physical symptoms (e.g. frequent bathroom visits, pain when urinating)*
- ❑ *Evidence of dealing, coercion, or unsafe situations*

### What to do:

- ❑ *Speak to your GP if you're concerned about their physical or mental health.*
- ❑ *Contact local drug and alcohol services or safeguarding teams for advice. You can find your local service in the link at the end of this document.*
- ❑ *If you believe they're at immediate risk (e.g. unconscious, unresponsive), call emergency services.*

**Remember: asking for help is a strength, not a failure.**

## Safeguarding: Understanding Risks, Responsibilities, and Legal Implications

When it comes to young people and ketamine, safeguarding isn't just about preventing harm—it's about creating the right support systems to protect vulnerable young people, uphold the law, and help them thrive. Whether your child is using ketamine themselves, has been given it by someone else, or you're considering how to respond, understanding your safeguarding responsibilities is vital.



**In the UK, children under 18 are legally considered minors.**



**Anyone under 18 is automatically considered more vulnerable to harm, including exploitation, coercion, or unsafe decision-making.**



**Even if a young person gives "consent" to use ketamine this does not remove adult responsibility—especially if a parent or adult facilitated it.**

### What if a Parent Gives Ketamine to Their Child?

While this might sound extreme, there have been rare cases where parents or carers—desperate to help their child cope with distress or mental health issues or from the physical effects of previous ketamine use—have sourced ketamine for them. **However, this is unlawful and unsafe to give a child or young person ketamine in any non-clinical setting, even with good intentions.**

#### Consequences:

- ❑ *Social services would be legally obliged to investigate.*
- ❑ *The child may be subject to a Child Protection Plan.*
- ❑ *Parents or carers may be subject to police investigation and risk losing custody or parental rights in severe cases.*

### When Professionals Have a Duty to Act

Any professional (teacher, youth worker, GP, housing officer, etc.) who becomes aware that a child or young person:

- ❑ *Is using ketamine regularly*
- ❑ *Has been given ketamine by an adult*
- ❑ *Appears at risk of harm (e.g. sexual exploitation, coercion, extreme self-neglect)*

*...has a legal and ethical duty to share this information with local safeguarding teams.*

#### This may trigger:

- ❑ *A Child in Need or Child Protection referral under the Children Act 1989*
- ❑ *A multi-agency response, including social services, education, CAMHS (Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services), and substance misuse teams*
- ❑ *Immediate safety planning for the young person*

**It's important to know:** Safeguarding is not about punishment—it's about support, protection, and early intervention.

## Final Thoughts: How You Can Respond to Safeguard Children and Young People

If you are a parent or carer worried about your child's ketamine use, and you're unsure what to do:

### ✓ Do:

- ❑ *Speak to your GP or school nurse and be honest about their use.*
- ❑ *Contact your local drug and alcohol service.*
- ❑ *Ask for a family support worker through early help services.*
- ❑ *Be open with professionals about your concerns—they are there to help, not blame.*

### ✗ Don't:

- ❑ *Attempt to "treat" your child's mental health by sourcing ketamine or any drug.*
- ❑ *Ignore signs of escalating harm or exploitation.*
- ❑ *Assume it's just "a phase" if your gut tells you something deeper is going on.*

**Remember**, you don't have to have all the answers. Parenting a young person who's experimenting with or using drugs can feel overwhelming, but you're not alone.

Reaching out for support is a sign of strength, not failure—and there are professionals and services who understand, won't judge, and genuinely want to help you and your child move forward safely.

Every step you take to stay connected, stay informed, and stay supportive makes a difference.

## Helpful Resources

- ❑ **YoungMinds:** advice on how to tackle sensitive subjects proactively– [www.youngminds.org.uk](http://www.youngminds.org.uk)
- ❑ **Birchwood ketamine support group (via Facebook):** <https://www.facebook.com/login/?next=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.facebook.com%2FbirchwoodKP%2Fphotos%2Fthe-ketamine-family-and-caregivers-support-group-will-be-on-again-tomorrow-eveni%2F1186000370193882%2F>
- ❑ **Find your local drug service.** These are commissioned to work with you and your child to help them in their use: <https://www.talktofrank.com/get-help/find-support-near-you>
- ❑ **Frontline podcast:** Focusing on a deep dive into ketamine use: <https://open.spotify.com/episode/06MtZ5YOrVkSCsMfpTZFq0>
- ❑ **The Ketamine Toolkit:** A toolkit to help a young person think about their use and make any changes they wish to make: <https://www.risk-and-resilience.co.uk/resources.html>

For more information or advice,  
please drop us a message:  
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### Disclaimer:

*This guide is for general information purposes only and is not intended to replace medical, legal, or professional advice. While every effort has been made to ensure the accuracy of the information provided, we recommend speaking to a qualified health professional, legal advisor, or relevant service if you have concerns about a young person's safety, wellbeing, or drug use. The content does not endorse or encourage illegal activity. All safeguarding concerns should be reported to your local authority in line with statutory guidance.*