

Is cocaine the new caffeine?

With the words "charlie", "blow" and "coke" rolling off the tongue

as easily – and often in the same sentence – as the names Kate Moss, Lindsay Lohan and Amy Winehouse, it seems obvious that the illegal and addictive class A drug otherwise known as cocaine is gradually losing its social stigma.

And it's a shift that's alarming the experts, including Paul Dillon of Drug and Alcohol Research and Training Australia. "These days cocaine has a soft, fluffy image and is seen as being fairly harmless," says Dillon. "Just look at its nicknames [snow, stardust and flake, among them]; heroin, on the other hand, is known by [the much harsher] smack, horse and hammer."

While news reports often link celebrities to the white stuff – who can forget those grainy images of Kate Moss allegedly racking up in a recording studio – the cocaine user is "anyone who has \$300 [the average cost in Australia per gram] to spare for the weekend", according to Dillon.

With celebs GLAMORISING IT and friends making it socially acceptable, Madeleine Collins sniffs out the answer to our question

Kate*, 26, adds: "And if you don't have the cash, friends are more than willing to spot you or go halves. Cocaine's a social drug, everyone shares."

Melbourne University associate professor and drug researcher John Fitzgerald says the dangerous side effects of the drug are getting lost in its supposedly glamorous image. "Users focus on the [short-term] feelings of euphoria and confidence at the expense of acknowledging the long-term effects, which include mental-health and heart problems, and [if the cocaine is being injected] an increased risk of contracting HIV and hepatitis C," he says.

But while it's easy to blame celebrities for glorifying cocaine use, Fitzgerald says its growing appeal is part of a much wider trend for stimulation on demand. "Today's high usage of illegal amphetamines, cocaine and even energy drinks signals a cultural shift in the

acceptability of using substances to make us more productive," Fitzgerald explains. "Being able to respond to challenges 24/7 is a desirable social attribute."

While Dillon acknowledges the softening of attitudes toward the drug, he points out that some studies show it's still largely considered to be dangerous. Cocaine can cause everything from facial tics and lung damage to "cocaine psychosis", which includes such symptoms as aggression and disturbing hallucinations. And there's no doubt it can cause serious damage to people's lives (just look at Amy Winehouse).

So, how socially acceptable is cocaine? With a nose for a good story, I decided to put public attitudes to the ultimate test: armed with a bag of icing sugar, a credit card and a pair of sunnies (just in case I'm recognised), I snorted the "drug" in three busy public places in Sydney, with some interesting results ...

*NAME HAS BEEN CHANGED

**"I START
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UP 'LINES'
in full view
of everyone"**

**Shocked
diners
sneakily
peeked.**

LOCATION:
Coffee shop
TIME: 5pm

Buoyed by the fact that one of my friends has come along for support, I pick a table in the middle of the half-full but lively coffee shop directly under a spotlight, and start racking up "lines" in full view of everyone. Two guys in their thirties glance over at me, and the guy with his back to us moves across so he, too, can watch. Despite their bravado, every time I look at them, they avert their gaze. After about 20 minutes and some serious snorting action (I must've done about four "lines"), the guys move to a table outside. I feel embarrassed and think I must come across as arrogant. As I snort some more (and yes, I *did* inhale the icing sugar!), a female member of staff clears tables around us. She doesn't bat an eyelid,

even though it's obvious what I'm doing. Later, I go to the counter with a blob of "cocaine" visible in my nostril and ask her if I can have a glass of water. "Do you want ice with that?" she replies. I can't believe I'm getting away with this! I then move tables and rack up once more, this time alone. A woman in her fifties sits at the table next to me. When she notices what I'm doing, she pulls her table away. As I snort and rub the remainder on my gums, she gets up and walks off in disgust but without saying a word – she even leaves her coffee behind! The fact there's a police station only 200 metres away is playing on my mind. I decide it's time to leave ...
Socially acceptable? Sort of. ▷



LOCATION: Train station TIME: 6.30pm

Standing on the fairly busy platform, I dip my key in my bag of "cocaine" and snort from it, sniffing loudly. A conservatively dressed older lady glares at me, but turns away when I look at her. When the train arrives, I stand opposite the door as people alight and, making sure there are no children around, I do two more key "bumps" (quick hits). No one gives me a second look. I get on the train and sit opposite three girls in their early twenties. I ask when the train leaves to get their attention and then "snort" twice and rub my nose.

I can tell they're watching, but they don't meet my eye. However, when I get off, one loudly exclaims, "Oh my God, did you see that?" Next, I stand against the wall doing more key bumps as two young guys sitting on a bench watch. When the train arrives, they get on and one yells, "Hey, can I have a line?" When I jump on to chat to them, the other guy looks nervous and disapproving, so I get off. Then, a woman in her late twenties calls out, "Is that coke?", and smiles as she walks past. **Socially acceptable? Sort of.**



LOCATION: Busy pub TIME: 8.30pm

I head straight to the toilets and start racking up on the basin, under the fluorescent-lit mirror. It's a busy night and there's a constant stream of mostly twentysomething women using the bathroom. In the first few minutes, three girls walk past, and although one does a double take, they all act nonchalant. As I continue to "snort", a South American girl comes over and says in a low but friendly voice, "Be careful, there are police out there", as if tipping me off out of concern. "Do you do it?" I ask. "Sometimes, but not in here," she whispers, clearly shocked at my



audacious behaviour. I get a couple of dirty looks from other girls as they stream in and out, but as I rack up the last line, one of them calls out, "Share, share!" Overdosed on icing sugar, I decide to leave and flick the last line into the sink. "What have you done?" cries another girl. Outside, in the bar, I decide to have one last "snort", and as I lean on a pillar with the bag in full view and a finger of the white stuff to my nose, a guy standing behind me asks someone: "Why doesn't she go to the toilets?"

Socially acceptable? Yes.

My verdict: I'm shocked. As someone who has never tried cocaine (and had to get tips on how to "snort"), I can't believe some of the bemused and complacent reactions I got regarding this dangerous drug. I'm kind of disappointed the older people didn't voice their obvious disapproval, but I guess they thought I was old enough to do what I wanted. While I don't think anyone thought I was "cool", the fact no one even attempted to stop me from "snorting" in a public place was incredible, and a real concern. **COSMO**

Cocaine: The impact
Despite its growing social acceptance, cocaine is a dangerous drug. According to Family Drug Support, it is extremely psychologically addictive, and the risk of an overdose increases when it's combined with other drugs or alcohol. If you need help, visit fds.org.au or call 1300 368 186.

Web poll: Is cocaine socially acceptable?

32% Yes **78% No**