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# Melting Down

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For cocaine extremists seeking peak pleasure at any cost, "free-basing" is the ultimate high. The smoking technique was rare until 1979, when head shops began mass-marketing \$15 free-base extraction kits. Although not practiced by most cocaine users, free-basing is disturbingly popular, especially in California. Its toll is high: the risk of drug dependence is vastly greater than with snorting, and no less than with injecting. As cocaine is just one distilled component of the coca leaf, cocaine free-base comes from carrying the refining process one ill-advised step further: the active drug is "freed" from its "base," a hydrochloride salt. Extraction techniques involve dissolving the cocaine and adding chemical catalysts—sodium hydroxide and ether or, more prudently, baking soda—that cause the free-base to separate. The precipitate, about half a gram from each gram of regular coke, is filtered or skimmed off and dried.

The stuff, resembling rock-candy granules, has a melting point half that of plain cocaine. It is customarily smoked in a small glass water pipe, often filled with rum instead of water. The bowl is usually fitted with several thicknesses of fine steel mesh so that the precious drips of melting coke are fully burned. A butane torch may be used, although a lighter or plain matches will do, to apply steady heat on the pipe's bowl and vaporize the free-base. (Accidents, not surprisingly, are common. Comedian Richard Pryor nearly died in 1980 in a mishap at the end of a free-basing binge: his rum spilled, ignited and set his clothes on fire.)

The user inhales the vapor and, in seconds, gets an orgasmic jolt. The sensation costs \$20, begins fading after a minute and is gone within ten minutes.

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