

## Short Notes

# Phencyclidine (“PCP”): A Dangerous Drug Impacting Youth

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**Abstract**

Initially created in the 1950's as an anesthetic, 1-phenylcyclohexylpiperidine or PCP as it commonly called, has become a problem for the youth of today. This highly volatile chemical is synthesized in underground laboratories throughout the United States. PCP comes in a variety of forms. From capsules, to vials of clear odorless liquids and even powders it is difficult to spot and often confused with other drugs. It can be smoked, injected, snorted, and absorbed through the skin or even dropped into one's eye. Time of onset of symptoms is directly related to the method of administration. Although its use is widespread it is often overlooked and users under the influence of PCP are mistakenly thought to be utilizing different drugs. In this paper I intend to explore in depth what exactly PCP is and how its use can affect those who choose to partake of it. I will also explore the signs and symptoms of those under its influence, and possible treatment.

**INTRODUCTION**

Angeldust, fry, hog, and embalming fluid, are but a few of the terms used to describe PCP on the streets today. Users around America use these unassuming names, among others, to refer to a drug that does not have unassuming effects. 1-phenylcyclohexylpiperidine is extremely dangerous to those who chose to use it. Its powerful effects warp an individual's perception of reality, creating a volatile situation in which the user has little to no control. Currently a Schedule II drug it is considered a hallucinogen, dissociative anesthetic, psychotomimetic, and a sedative-hypnotic. Possessing so many different characteristics it is easy to see why it is a drug to be concerned about. Just taking one dose of PCP is the equivalent taking many different drugs at once. Yet on a daily basis, at an alarming rate, this drug is being used by young people around the world. In a Monitoring the Future study conducted in 2000, 2.3 percent of 12<sup>th</sup> graders reported having used PCP. Although this number has dropped from over 3 percent in 1991 it is still something to be should be concerned about.

If we want to understand PCP we first must understand how it affects our bodies. The affects of PCP manifest in a variety of ways. Hallucinations can occur in users. The distortions or alterations of an individual's perception off reality can be either pleasant or terrifying [1]. PCP differs from other hallucinogens in the fact that it affects the glutamate receptors of the brain in place of serotonin receptors. This main responsibility of the glutamate receptors is to control such functions as pain perception, environmental responses, such as that of the fight or flight reflex, as well as learning and memory. PCP also affects the sympathetic

systems by creating an increase in blood pressure, breathing, and pulse rate. Some symptoms are can be easy to spot in users while others are not. Possible signs of one being under the influence of PCP can include; blank stare, confusion, disorientation, and slow or slurred speech. Some of the more difficult symptoms to spot at first glance are an increased pain threshold, as well as the potential for violence [2]. Another property of PCP is that it also has dissociative anesthetic. These classes of drugs suppress the sensory activities in the body [3]. By suppressing the brain's ability to take in information from the environment a alter state of reality or even a complete detachment can occur. Evidence of this can be seen in the story of 32 year old Shaun Martin. In June of 2013, Martin plead guilty to hitting six people with his car while driving high on PCP. When question by the police on the night of the accident Martin reported to have ask, "Was I driving?" " Mr. Martin was so far detached that he had no recollection of getting in his car, much less crashing into a fruit stand [4]. This is just one example of how one can perform an action and have no comprehension that they are doing it. PCP is also known for its psychotomimetic properties. These types of drugs create symptoms in users that mimic a multitude of psychiatric disorders [5]. This is why it can be so difficult for mental health professionals to determine between substance abuse disorders and other mental health diagnoses. Another example of drug with these properties is LSD. Both drugs can affect an individual's state of mind to the point producing a temporary psychosis. Psychotic breaks such as these can sometimes be responsible mental health patients being misdiagnosed with disorders such as schizophrenia and other dissociative disorders. Lastly, PCP also

functions as a sedative hypnotic. Sedative hypnotics are a class of drugs that depress the Central Nervous System. This is the part of the drug that is responsible for its calming effect on users. As we can see each individual attribute of the drug is dangerous on its own. Yet these individual attributes are nothing compared to the combined effects that will manifest when one chooses to use PCP.

Now that we have a better understanding of what PCP is, let us take a moment to explore who is using it, and where it comes from. PCP is manufactured in clandestine labs across the United States as well as smuggled across the border from Mexico. Being odorless and water soluble makes it easy to conceal and difficult for law enforcement to spot. Like most illicit drugs found on the streets users often do not know what it is they are using. Yet this does little to deter users who want to experience the high associated with the drug. Emergency room visits involving PCP doubled from 1991 to 2001 [6]. The ten year high of 6,102 visits shows that the drug was in the process of making a comeback despite being banned in the 1980's. Yet since then, use has skyrocketed. In 2011 almost 22,000 men ages 25-34 visited emergency rooms with PCP related cases [7]. With female users, of the same age, group exceeding 12,000. During this study an increase in usage by males and females age 18 to 24 can also be seen. This increase is alarming. This alone shows resurgence in the use of PCP. In 2009 122,000 Americans 12 or older reported having abused PCP within the past year [8]. This increase of PCP users makes it imperative to gain a better understanding of the drug as well as how to spot its effects on individuals who choose to use it.

The most common form of illicit use, of PCP is smoking "wet." This is the name given to the process of coating marijuana or tobacco with PCP and smoking it. "The typical PCP cigarette contains 1 to 10 mg of the drug" [9], and to put this in perspective let's look at how different dosages can affect users. Bay and Patel separate these different levels of usage into 3 stages. Stage One users ingest only 2 to 5 mg of PCP. At this stage users begin to exhibit a multitude of symptoms. They become unpredictable and disorientated. They can also become volatile and act aggressively. Another symptom that occurs at this level is becoming lethargic, paranoid, and agitated. Often times the user will cycle through all of these. Other symptoms include a decrease in pain perception and nystagmus [9]. As the dosage increases so too does the severity of side effects. At stage two, or 5-25 mg, users can experience "stupor, mild coma, and intact response to deep pain, muscle contractions and strange body postures [9]. Finally stage three users who consume more than 25 mg no longer experience a pain response, become comatose, suffer from convulsions, and

eventually the possibility of death. When smoked the effects of PCP begin to appear within 1-5 minutes and can last for up to 6 hours [10]. This fast acting and long-lasting high can create volatile situation endangering the user as well as those around him. By combining the varying effects of different types of drugs, the PCP high is unique.

PCP like many drugs was initially created in an effort to better mankind. Yet like countless other cases it was only a matter of time before individuals seeking a mind altering experience discovered the drug and began to abuse it. As we can see this drug's negative side effects far outweighed any potential benefit it may have possessed. With so many different physiological and psychological affects, it is a drug we all should be concerned about. Despite being banned its use has continued to rise. Individuals of all ages and backgrounds are using. Just a small amount can have major consequences. Users of this drug have little control over their own actions much less an understanding of right or wrong. This makes it detrimental for us to be able to identify the signs and symptoms of its use, so as, to protect users and those around them from harm. Through this identification we will be better prepared to treat those individuals caught within its grasp.

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