

Heroin

Heroin is an illegal substance that comes from the opioid class of drugs and is made from the sap of the opium poppy. It is highly addictive and its use can result in dependence and craving. Initial effects include feelings of wellbeing and relief from physical pain.

Adverse effects include the risk of overdose. Significant health and lifestyle problems may be related to longer term heroin use. Other opioids include morphine, codeine, pethidine, buprenorphine and methadone.

Heroin is usually mixed or 'cut' with other substances – such as glucose, talc or bleach – to boost profits. This means that the person using heroin has no idea if the dose will be strong or weak. Heroin generally takes the form of granules or powder, and can range in colour from white to brown.

It is most commonly injected intravenously (into a vein), but can be snorted or smoked. Common slang terms for heroin include 'smack', 'horse' and 'hammer'.

How heroin works

Heroin is a central nervous system depressant, which means it slows down brain function and affects breathing (which can slow down or even stop). Body temperature and blood pressure drop, and the heartbeat can become irregular. A person may lose unconsciousness or lapse into a coma. The effects of heroin can be reversed if ambulance officers are called and administer the drug naloxone.

Common effects of heroin

The effects of heroin depend on the strength of the dose, the size, weight, general health and state of mind of the person taking the drug, and the effects of other drugs that might have been taken at the same time or even in the last two days. If other depressant drugs such as sleeping pills, tranquillisers, methadone or alcohol have been taken, the effects of heroin are increased. This can result in coma or even death.

Some of the immediate effects of taking heroin include:

- A rush of pleasurable feelings and relief from physical pain
- Feeling sick or vomiting
- Shallow breathing, drowsiness and sleepiness
- A drop in body temperature
- Narrowing of the pupils
- Loss of sex drive.

The symptoms of heroin overdose

One of the most dangerous adverse effects of heroin use is the risk of overdose. The symptoms of overdose include:

- Dangerously low body temperature
- Slowed breathing
- Blue lips and fingernails
- Cold clammy skin
- Convulsions and coma.

What to do if you suspect an overdose

If someone who has taken drugs is not responding when you talk to them, is snoring loudly or making gurgling noises, it may mean that they are in a coma and are having trouble breathing. Do not assume that they are just 'sleeping off' the effects. Their airway may be obstructed by the tongue falling back or other blockages. **This is a medical emergency. If you can't wake them, call an ambulance immediately. Dial triple zero (000).**

Heroin dependence and tolerance

As with a number of other drugs, it is possible to build up a tolerance to heroin. After only a short time, the person using heroin will need to take larger doses to achieve the same effect. Soon their body will come to depend on heroin in order to function 'normally'.

For some people who are dependent on heroin, nothing else in life matters except the drug. Career, relationships and even basic needs like eating can be ignored. Financial, legal and other personal problems may be related to heroin use. The person craves the drug and this psychological dependence makes them panic if access is denied, even temporarily.

The symptoms of heroin withdrawal

Withdrawal symptoms can start after a matter of hours without a dose of heroin and may include:

- Cravings
- Diarrhoea and vomiting
- Stomach cramps
- Sweating
- Bone, joint and muscle pain and twitching
- Mood swings and crying.

Damage caused by long-term use

Using heroin on a regular basis can lead to significant health and lifestyle problems including:

- Collapsed veins and skin abscesses
- Risk of contracting various blood-borne viruses, such as HIV and hepatitis, or blood poisoning from sharing needles and other injecting equipment or using dirty or contaminated equipment
- Chronic constipation
- Increased risk of contracting pneumonia and other lung problems
- Fertility problems
- Disturbances of the menstrual cycle for women, or impotence in men
- Poor nutrition and reduced immunity
- Loss of relationships, career and home as the need for the drug becomes all-consuming
- Damage caused by dangerous fillers mixed with the heroin
- Risk of overdose.

Treatment for heroin addiction

- Treatment options for heroin addiction include:
- Detoxification
- Individual counselling
- Group therapy
- Drug programs such as methadone, buprenorphine or naltrexone.

Where to get help

- In an emergency, call triple zero (000)
- Your doctor – for information or referral to a drug treatment service
- Alcohol and drug treatment services – for help with dependence, detoxification, individual counselling and group therapy

- DrugInfo Tel. 1300 85 85 84 – for information
- DirectLine Tel. 1800 888 236 – for 24-hour confidential drug and alcohol telephone counselling, information and referral
- Counselling Online – for 24-hour confidential drug and alcohol counselling, information and referral
- Family Drug Help – for information and support for people concerned about a relative or friend using drugs Tel. 1300 660 068

Things to remember

- Heroin is a depressant drug, which means it slows down certain functions of the brain and nervous system.
- Some of the immediate effects of heroin include feelings of wellbeing and relief from physical pain.
- Heroin is highly addictive – the body adapts to regular heroin use and may come to depend on the drug to function 'normally'.
- For some people who are dependent on heroin, nothing else in life matters except the drug.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

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