

Heroin



What is heroin?

Heroin is a drug that comes from the opium poppy. It is one of a group of very strong pain-killing drugs called narcotic analgesics or opioids.

Opioid drugs include opium, morphine and codeine. There are other human-made opioid drugs, such as pethidine and methadone. These drugs can all be used legally, for medical reasons, but heroin is not legal.

Heroin (also called smack, skag, hammer, H, or horse) is in the class of drugs called depressants, because it slows down the brain and the central nervous system.

How is heroin used?

Heroin usually comes in powder form. It can be different colours depending on how refined it is – white powder is usually more refined than brown or pink rocks, a lumpy powder.

Heroin is usually injected, smoked or snorted. It is absorbed into the blood and acts on the brain very quickly.

People who sell heroin often mix or 'cut' the powder with other things that look the same, to make the drug go further. Some mixed-in substances may have unpleasant or harmful effects. It is difficult to tell what is actually in the drug.

Effects of heroin

What heroin does to you depends on:

- how much you take
- how pure the heroin is
- your height and weight

- your general health
- your past experience with heroin
- whether you use heroin on its own or with other drugs
- whether you use alone or with others, at home or at a party, etc.

Immediate effects

The effects of heroin may last up to a few hours which can:

- make you feel really good
- make physical pain disappear
- make you feel nauseous or vomit
- make the pupils in your eyes get smaller (pinpoint pupils)
- make your breathing become shallow
- cause constipation — when it is difficult to defecate (shit)
- make you feel sleepy (on the nod).



Long term effects of heroin

If you use heroin often for a long time you may:

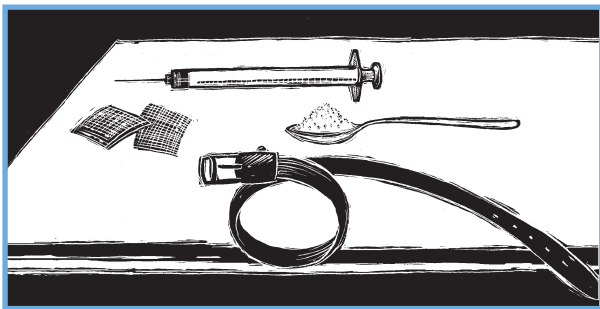
- overdose (have too much heroin — the longer you use heroin, the more likely you are to overdose)
- have long-term constipation
- get damaged veins from injecting a lot in the same site
- lose your appetite or get sick from lack of healthy food
- have your menstrual period at the wrong time or not at all (women)
- get skin abscesses (sores with pus)
- find it difficult to get pregnant (women)



- find it difficult to get an erection (men)
- get pneumonia — a serious lung disease
- have heart and lung problems
- get tetanus — a disease caused by infection through the places on your body where you inject.

The way a person uses heroin can also cause some problems:

- Street heroin is usually mixed with other things, therefore, it is hard to know how strong the heroin is. This can lead to accidental overdose or death.
- Injecting heroin with used or dirty injecting equipment makes you more likely to get infected with HIV, hepatitis B or C, and get blood poisoning (septicaemia) and skin abscesses. So that you don't get these problems, DO NOT SHARE fits (needles and syringes), spoons, water, filters, alcohol swabs or tourniquets.



Overdose

Overdose of heroin (dropping) is very common and can happen to anyone. Even small amounts of heroin may cause some people to overdose — for example, new users or those who started using again. This can happen after even a short time of not using.

When a person overdoses, they may have:

- very slow breathing, or snore
- cold skin and low body temperature
- slow heartbeat
- muscle twitching
- slow working of the central nervous system
- gurgling sound in the throat from vomit or saliva
- blue tips of fingernails or toenails because of low oxygen.

The person may go into a coma or even die.

If someone overdoses, other people with them should:

- phone 000 to get an ambulance and tell the operator that the person has overdosed (the police will not come unless the person dies or becomes violent)
- try to keep the person awake — walk them around, talk to them, use their name
- if the person is unconscious, put them on their side, in the recovery position
- stay with the person
- try not to panic
- check their breathing, clear their airway
- do mouth-to-mouth resuscitation if they stop breathing
- if the person is on the nod and looks like they may overdose, put them on the floor, on their side.

Do NOT:

- inject the person with anything — salt, milk or speed don't work against the heroin and can cause more harm
- put them under the shower
- put anything in their mouth as it can cause choking and stop them from breathing. Even if someone fits (has a seizure or convulsions), the best thing to do is move things from around them, so they don't hurt themselves.

Preventing overdose

To help prevent overdose:

- don't use heroin alone
- don't use heroin at the same time as alcohol, tranquillisers or other drugs
- if buying heroin from a new dealer, try a small amount first to test how strong the heroin is
- be aware of how tolerance can affect you (see on page 3).



Pregnancy and heroin

Using heroin during pregnancy can affect both the mother and the unborn child. Inform antenatal staff of heroin use and attend regular antenatal checkups.

Regular checkups are important because heroin-dependent women are more likely than other women to:

- lose the baby during pregnancy, have the baby too early or have the baby born dead
- pass infections such as HIV, hepatitis B or C or blood poisoning on to the baby
- have health and social problems during pregnancy and childbirth.

Babies can also have problems after they are born. It is important to get help from health staff on how to care for your baby. New babies of heroin-dependent mothers are more likely to:

- be sick in the first few weeks of life and later
- have withdrawal symptoms when they are born (because they are no longer getting heroin from the mother's blood supply)

Mixing heroin with other drugs

You are more likely to overdose if you use heroin at the same time as other drugs, especially alcohol or minor tranquillisers. Mixing other drugs with heroin can also cause other physical and mental problems.

Tolerance and dependence

Anyone can develop a tolerance to heroin or other drugs. Tolerance means that you must take more of the drug to feel the same effects you used to have with smaller amounts.

Dependence on heroin means that it takes up a lot of your thoughts, emotions and activities. You spend a lot of time thinking about using heroin, looking for heroin, using it and getting over the effects of using it. You also find it difficult to stop using or control how much you use. Dependence can lead to a variety of health, money, legal, work and relationship problems.

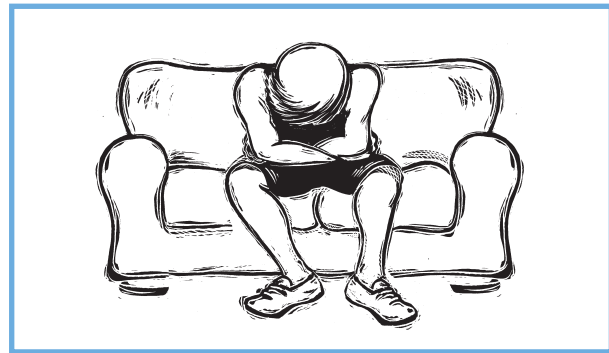
Not all people who try heroin become dependent. Dependence happens gradually with ongoing use.

Withdrawal

People who are dependent on heroin find it very hard to stop using or cut down because of withdrawal symptoms. These can begin to occur only a few hours after last using heroin.

Symptoms include:

- feeling restless
- yawning
- a runny nose
- crying
- diarrhoea
- low blood pressure
- goosebumps
- stomach and leg cramps
- wanting heroin very badly (cravings).



Heroin and the law

Using heroin is illegal. If you use, sell or give heroin to someone else and get caught, you could face substantial fines and penalties including a prison sentence. Many overseas countries (eg Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand) have much harsher penalties — including the death penalty — for people who break their drug laws.

If you are convicted on a drug charge you then have a criminal record. This can cause many other problems such as trouble getting a job, a credit card, or a visa to travel overseas.

It is illegal to drive under the influence of drugs, including heroin. Penalties include losing your licence, a fine and/or jail.



Heroin and driving

Heroin makes it more difficult to drive safely, especially when it is taken with alcohol. It is illegal to drive under the influence of drugs, including heroin. If you break this law you could lose your licence for a set time, or be fined or sent to prison.

Since January 2007, police have been conducting random roadside drug testing and can give any driver a roadside oral drug test. If you test positive you won't be charged immediately but you will be prohibited from driving for 24 hours. The sample is sent to a laboratory and if it tests positive to heroin or other drugs, you will be charged to appear in court.

Even where random roadside drug testing is not being carried out, if a police officer suspects you have used drugs you could be arrested and taken to a hospital for a blood and urine test. The samples will be sent to a laboratory and if they test positive to heroin or any other drug (including prescribed drugs), NSW Police will determine whether your driving would have been impaired by your drug use. You will then be charged accordingly.

Anyone under the influence of heroin who kills or injures another person while driving a motor vehicle, can be sentenced to a term in prison.

Information and advice

24 hour confidential telephone counseling service

NSW

Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS)
Tel. (02) 9361 8000
**Toll free.* 1800 422 599

Victoria

Direct Line
Tel. (03) 9416 1818
**Toll free.* 1800 888 236

Western Australia

Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS)
Tel. (08) 9442 5000
**Toll free.* 1800 198 024

Queensland

Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS)
Tel. (07) 3837 5989
**Toll free.* 1800 177 833

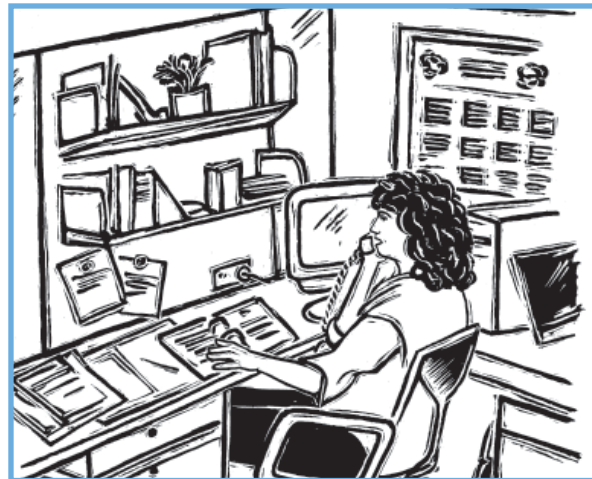
South Australia

Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS)
Tel. (08) 8363 8618
**Toll free.* 1300 131 340

Northern Territory

Amity Community Service
Tel. (08) 8944 6565
**Toll free.* 1800 684 372

Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS)
**Toll free.* 1800 131 350



Tasmania

Alcohol and Drug Information Service
**Toll free.* 1800 811 994

ACT

Alcohol and Drug Program
Tel. (02) 6207 9977

** Toll free numbers are only available if you are calling from within that state.*

You will find a copy of this sheet at:
www.communitybuilders.nsw.gov.au/drugs_action/factsheets_index.html

Further copies are available from the Better Health Centre
Tel. (02) 9816 0452 TTY. (02) 9391 9900

Other publications in this series include Alcohol, Marijuana, Cocaine, Benzodiazepines, Ecstasy, Hallucinogens and Speed.

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