

Fact Sheet

Heroin

What is heroin?

Heroin is a depressant drug. Depressant drugs do not necessarily make you feel depressed. Rather, they slow down the activity of the central nervous system and the messages going between the brain and the body.

Heroin is made from the opium poppy. It is one of a group of drugs known as 'opioids'. Other opioids include opium, morphine, codeine, pethidine, oxycodone, buprenorphine and methadone.

Other common names

Heroin is also known as smack, skag, dope, H, junk, hammer, slow, gear, harry, big harry, horse, black tar, china white, Chinese H, white dynamite, dragon, elephant, homebake and poison.

Effects of heroin

The effects of any drug vary from person to person. How heroin affects a person depends on many things including their size, weight and health, whether they are accustomed to taking it, whether other drugs are present in their body, and the amount taken.

There is no safe level of drug use. Use of any drug always carries some risk – even prescribed medications can produce unwanted side effects.

Low to moderate doses

Heroin is usually injected into a vein, but it's also smoked ('chasing the dragon'), and added to cigarettes and cannabis. The effects are usually felt straight away. Sometimes heroin is snorted – the effects take around 10 to 15 minutes to feel if it's used in this way.

The following effects may be experienced and last for three to five hours:

- › Intense pleasure and pain relief
- › Relaxation, drowsiness and clumsiness
- › Confusion
- › Slurred and slow speech
- › Slow breathing and heart beat
- › Dry mouth
- › Tiny pupils
- › Reduced appetite and vomiting
- › Decreased sex drive.

Injecting heroin and sharing needles may also cause:

- › Tetanus
- › Hepatitis B
- › Hepatitis C
- › HIV/AIDS.

Higher doses

Large amounts of heroin or a strong batch may also produce the following effects:

- › Trouble concentrating
- › Falling asleep ('going on the nod')
- › Wanting to urinate but finding it hard to
- › Increased sweating and itching
- › Irregular heartbeat
- › Cold, clammy skin
- › Slow breathing, blue lips and finger tips
- › Passing out
- › Death.

Naloxone (also known as Narcan[®]) reverses the effects of heroin, particularly in the case of an overdose.

Naloxone can be administered by authorised medical personnel such as ambulance officers, who don't need to involve the police. Family and friends can also administer naloxone if they join one of the trials taking place in Australia (www.naloxoneinfo.org).

Long-term effects

Regular use of heroin may eventually cause:

- › Intense sadness
- › Irregular periods and difficulty having children (females)
- › Loss of sex drive (males)
- › Constipation
- › Damaged heart, lungs, liver and brain
- › Vein damage and skin, heart and lung infections from injecting
- › Taking heroin with other drugs.

The effects of mixing heroin with other drugs, including alcohol, prescription medications and over-the-counter medicines, are often unpredictable.

Mixing heroin with other depressant drugs, such as alcohol, cannabis or benzodiazepines can cause breathing to slow and eventually stop.

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Combining heroin with stimulant drugs such as ice, speed or ecstasy places enormous strain on the heart and body, which can lead to stroke.

Pregnancy and breastfeeding

Heroin can be passed on to an unborn baby through the placenta, or to an infant in breast milk. This could harm the baby and increase the chance of going into labour early.

Driving

The effects of heroin, such as reduced concentration and drowsiness, can affect driving ability. The symptoms of 'coming down' and withdrawal can also affect a person's driving ability.

Effects on work

Under occupational health and safety legislation, all employees have a responsibility to make sure they look after their own and their co-workers' safety. The effects of heroin such as drowsiness and confusion can affect a person's ability to work safely and effectively.

Tolerance and dependence

There is evidence that after prolonged use heroin is highly addictive. People who use heroin regularly can develop dependence and tolerance to it, which means they need to take larger amounts of heroin to get the same effect.

Dependence on heroin can be psychological, physical, or both. People who are dependent on heroin find that using the drug becomes far more important than other activities in their life. They crave it and find it very difficult to stop using heroin. People who are psychologically dependent on heroin may find they feel an urge to use it when they are in specific surroundings or socialising with friends. Physical dependence occurs when a person's body adapts to heroin and gets used to functioning with the drug present.

Withdrawal

If a dependent person stops taking heroin, or severely cuts down the amount they use, they may experience withdrawal symptoms. These symptoms can start within six to 24 hours after the last dose. They usually peak within one to three days and gradually subside after five to seven days.

Withdrawal symptoms that may be experienced include:

- › Cravings for heroin
- › Restlessness and irritability
- › Depression and crying
- › Diarrhoea
- › Restless sleep and yawning
- › Stomach and leg cramps, muscle spasms
- › Vomiting and no appetite
- › Goose bumps
- › Runny nose
- › Low blood pressure and fast heart rate.

Getting help

If your use of heroin is affecting your health, family, relationships, work, school, financial or other life situation, you should seek help.

A good place to start is your local doctor who is likely to know your medical history. Your doctor can give you information, a referral to a treatment service and ongoing support after specialist treatment is completed.

Another option is self-referral. Many specialist treatment services allow this and you can contact them directly.

Further information

The DrugInfo website (www.druginfo.adf.org.au) has information on:

- › support services in your state or territory
- › treatment options
- › free resources on heroin.

The Australian Drug Information Network website (www.adin.com.au) has further information about self-referral treatment services.



druginfo.adf.org.au



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*These fact sheets
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