

Heroin is a highly addictive illegal drug. On the street, it is also called smack, horse, junk and H.

Heroin belongs to a group of drugs called opioids. It is made by chemically changing morphine, a natural substance found in opium poppies. Heroin is a powder and, depending on impurities or additives, is white or brownish.

Street heroin can be pure or diluted (“cut”) with such substances as starch, powdered sugar, talcum powder, other drugs or strychnine.

Heroin can be injected, snorted or smoked. When it is heated and burned, fumes are released that can be inhaled. Heroin can also be added to regular cigarettes or marijuana joints.

Possessing, producing and trafficking in heroin are criminal offenses that result in fines and/or prison sentences.

Effects of Short-term Use

Depending on how heroin is used, the effects can be felt in seconds (if injected into a vein, inhaled) or minutes (if snorted, injected into a muscle under the skin).

Heroin use results in feelings of intense pleasure (euphoria) and reduced pain. The immediate effects usually include a warm flushing of the skin, dry mouth and a heavy feeling in the extremities. Nausea, vomiting and severe itching are not uncommon.

Longer-lasting effects include “nodding” (alternating between a wakeful and drowsy state) that occurs for several hours. The pupils of the eyes become smaller, and breathing becomes shallow. Large doses can slow breathing so much that users can slip into a coma and die. Because it is difficult to know the strength of heroin bought on the street, it is easy to overdose.

Effects of Long-term use

- Injecting heroin regularly can lead to such medical problems as collapsed veins; bacterial infections; abscesses; infectious diseases such as hepatitis B, hepatitis C and HIV; infection of the heart lining and valves; arthritis and other rheumatological problems. Smoking heroin often can lead to pneumonia and other lung conditions.

- Heroin decreases appetite, which can result in malnutrition. Chronic constipation is also common.
- Women who use heroin can have irregular periods, and men can become impotent.
- Frequent heroin use can lead to serious personal problems. Users may continue using even when their job or schoolwork suffers, or when heroin use causes financial, spiritual or legal problems.
- Babies born to heroin-addicted mothers are often premature and underweight, and they may go through withdrawal at birth. They can be infected with HIV, hepatitis, and/or blood poisoning.

Heroin and addiction

If heroin is used regularly, tolerance and addiction develop. This means more of the drug is needed to feel the same effects.

When an addicted person stops using heroin, withdrawal symptoms start a few hours later. These symptoms include restlessness, yawning, runny nose, muscle and bone pain, sweating, tears, diarrhea, cramps, goose bumps, high blood pressure and strong craving. These effects get stronger for two to four days and then gradually weaken. Depression, insomnia, weakness and stress can last for several weeks or months.

For more information, contact your local AADAC office or call 1-866-33AADAC