

# 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.

Some opioid drugs are 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:

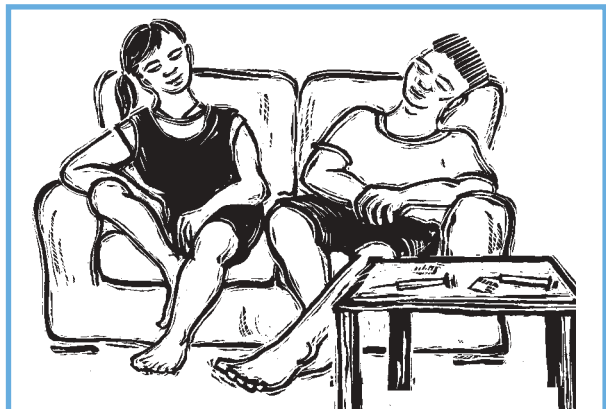
- how much you take
- how pure the heroin is

- 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:

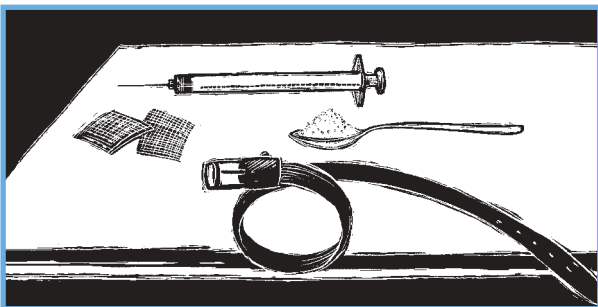
- overdose (have too much heroin — the longer you use heroin, the more likely you are to overdose)
- have long-term constipation
- get damaged veins from injecting a lot in the same site
- lose your appetite or get sick from lack of healthy food
- have your menstrual period at the wrong time or not at 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, 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 — 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 on your own
- 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
- try a small amount first to test how strong the heroin is, or be aware of how tolerance can affect you (see 'Tolerance and dependence' 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 and 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.

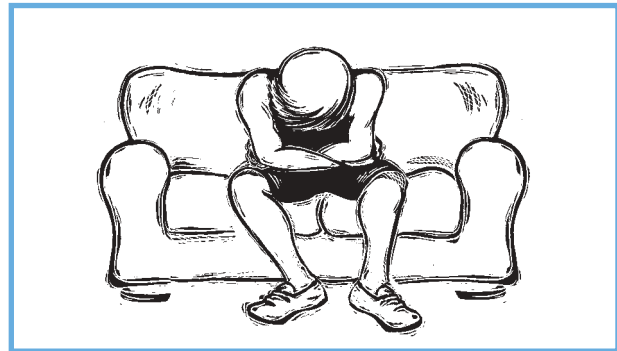
'Dependence' on heroin means that it takes up a lot of your thoughts, emotions and activities. You spend a lot of time thinking about using heroin, looking for heroin, using it and getting over the effects of using it. You also find it difficult to stop using or control how much you use. Dependence can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

Not all people who ever use 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 slows down the workings of your brain and your body, so it may make you drive dangerously.