

WHAT IS HEROIN?

Heroin is an illegal, semi-synthetic opioid made from morphine and is usually found in a white or brown powder, or as a sticky tar-like substance. From there, it can be injected, sniffed, snorted, or smoked in order to get the user high. Heroin is also sometimes “cut” with other substances, such as Fentanyl, making it one of the most addictive (and deadliest) drugs out there.



BRAIN CHANGES

Heroin is a fast-acting drug that almost immediately enters the brain, producing a rush of euphoria in users. This feeling is unnatural and isn't something that the body can produce on its own. After a little while (sometimes after the first use) the body becomes used to this feeling, and the user ends up stuck in the cycle of addiction because they're trying to recreate that feeling of euphoria.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

National Institute on Drug Abuse:

www.drugabuse.gov/drug-topics/heroin

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention:

www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/heroin/index.html

HEROIN

ADDICTIVE & DANGEROUS



in the know

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SHORT-TERM EFFECTS

Though people experience a rapid and intense rush right after using heroin, this is quickly followed by unpleasant side effects such as:

- Dry mouth
- Warm flushing of the skin
- Heavy feeling in the arms and legs
- Nausea and vomiting
- Severe itching
- Clouded mental functioning

Heroin also slows down breathing and heart function, which is why some individuals have died even after only taking it once.



LONG-TERM EFFECTS

The most serious long-term effect of heroin use is the potential for addiction. While this is deadly and dangerous on its own, heroin also produces serious physical and mental effects as well, such as:

- Insomnia
- Collapsed veins (from injection)
- Damaged nasal tissue inside (from snorting the drug)
- Infection of the heart lining and valves
- Abscesses (from injection)
- Constipation and stomach cramping
- Liver and kidney disease
- Lung complications, including pneumonia
- Mental disorders such as depression and antisocial personality disorder
- Sexual dysfunction for men
- Irregular menstrual cycles for women

Because heroin is commonly injected, the use of contaminated needles (particularly through sharing with others) means a drastically increased chance of contracting HIV/AIDS, hepatitis, and bacterial heart infections. Additionally, long-term use is associated with some loss of the brain's white matter. This may affect decision-making, behavior control, and responses to stressful situations, leading to increased risk-taking (particularly when it comes to getting more heroin).

WITHDRAWAL

People with an addiction to heroin who stop using the drug abruptly may have severe withdrawal. Withdrawal symptoms—which can begin as early as a few hours after the drug was last taken—include:

- Restlessness
- Severe muscle and bone pain

- Sleep problems
- Diarrhea and vomiting
- Chills and cold flashes
- Uncontrollable leg movements
- Severe heroin cravings

These symptoms are incredibly painful, with some reporting them as “unbearable.” In an effort to avoid withdrawal symptoms, someone with heroin use disorder may resume using.



OVERDOSE AND DEATH

With heroin use, overdose is a possibility every time. Overdose can occur from taking too much, or unknowingly taking heroin laced with something else. Using heroin is a gamble that can have a fatal outcome. Signs of an overdose include:

- Slow and shallow breathing
- Fingernails, lips and/or skin turning blue.
- Vomiting
- Clammy skin
- Weak pulse
- Low blood pressure
- Disorientation

- Slurred speech
- Inability to have a conversation
- Choking or gurgling sounds (some people refer to this as the death-rattle)
- Unresponsiveness
- Unconsciousness

Once loss of consciousness occurs, breathing can slow so much that it leads to hypoxia (where the brain no longer receives enough oxygen to function) or progresses to where breathing stops altogether and death occurs.

STAY SAFE, SAY NO

Heroin is one of the most dangerous, and deadly, drugs out there. The best way to keep yourself from becoming another overdose statistic is to just not ever start.

