



American Council for Drug Education, an affiliate of Phoenix House
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BASIC FACTS ABOUT DRUGS: HEROIN

What is Heroin?

Heroin is a morphine derivative, and morphine is opium's most potent active ingredient. First synthesized in 1874, heroin was widely used in medicine in the early part of the 20th Century, until its addictive potential was recognized. Pure heroin is a white powder with a bitter taste. Street heroin may vary in color from white to dark brown because of impurities or additives. There is a dark brown or black form of the drug, as dense as roofing tar or coal, known as "black tar."



Known on the street as smack, horse, H, junk, or scag, heroin is the most commonly abused of narcotics. Narcotic drugs (also called opioids) are derivatives of the opium poppy (*Papaver somniferum*) or chemically similar synthetics.

How is Heroin Taken?

When prescribed, narcotics are most often taken by mouth. Heroin, however, is generally inhaled or injected, although it may also be smoked. Heroin can be mixed with tobacco or marijuana and smoked in a pipe or cigarette. It may also be heated and burned, releasing fumes that users inhale ("chasing the dragon").

Users who choose injection, generally inject directly into a major vein ("mainlining"), although some may start by injecting under the skin ("popping").

Heroin abusers often use other drugs as well. They may "speedball," taking cocaine or methamphetamine with heroin, or use alcohol, marijuana, or tranquilizers to enhance the high and blunt effects of withdrawal.

Paying the Price of Heroin Use

The negative consequences of heroin use range from mild distress to life-threatening dangers and include:

- Dry, itchy skin and skin infections
- Constricted pupils and reduced night vision
- Nausea and vomiting (following early use or high doses)
- Constipation and loss of appetite
- Menstrual irregularity
- Reduced sex drive
- Scarring ("tracks") along veins and collapsed veins from repeated injections
- Irregular blood pressure
- Slow and irregular heartbeat (arrhythmia)
- Fatigue, breathlessness, and labored, noisy breathing due to excessive fluid in the lungs ("the rattles")
- Injuries that result from engaging in any activity (such as working, driving, or operating machinery) when incapacitated by heroin use
- Dependence, addiction
- Hepatitis, AIDS, and other infections from unsanitary injection
- Stroke or heart attack caused by blood clots resulting from insoluble additives
- Respiratory paralysis, heart arrest, coma, and death from accidental overdose

What is Heroin's Behavioral Impact?

The behavioral impact of habitual heroin use is generally devastating. Most habitual users are incapable of concentration, learning, or clear thought. Rarely are they able to hold a job. They are apathetic, indifferent to consequences, and unable to sustain personal relationships. For many, the inability to honestly earn enough to meet their drug needs leads to crime. For the overwhelming majority, compulsive use prompts behavior that is self-destructive and irresponsible, often antisocial, and characteristically indifferent to the injury, pain, or loss it causes others.

Can Heroin Addicts Recover?

Yes, they can. Treatment takes various forms, and detoxification may be needed, by some, to manage the effects of withdrawal. The main thrust of treatment, however, addresses underlying causes of drug abuse and helps recovering abusers become more self-aware, self-reliant, responsible, and able to manage stress without the "crutch" of drugs.