

HEROINE ADDICTION

What is Heroin?

Heroin is an illegal, highly addictive drug. It is both the most abused and the most rapidly acting of the opiates. It is typically sold as a white or brownish powder or as the black sticky substance known on the streets as "black tar heroin."

Although purer heroin is becoming more common, most street heroin is "cut" with other drugs or with substances such as sugar, starch, powdered milk or quinine. Street heroin can also be cut with strychnine or other poisons. Because heroin abusers do not know the actual strength of the drug or its true contents, they are at risk of overdose or death. Heroin also poses special problems because of the transmission of HIV and other diseases that can occur from sharing needles or other injection equipment.

Heroin is processed from morphine, a naturally occurring substance extracted from the seed pod of the Asian poppy plant. Heroin usually appears as a white or brown powder. Street names associated with heroin include "smack," "H," "skag," and "junk." Other names may refer to types of heroin produced in a specific geographical area, such as "Mexican black tar."

Heroin is usually injected, sniffed/snorted, or smoked. Typically, a heroin abuser may inject up to four times a day. Intravenous injection provides the greatest intensity and most rapid onset of euphoria (7 to 8 seconds), while intramuscular injection produces a relatively slow onset of euphoria (5 to 8 minutes). When heroin is sniffed or smoked, peak effects are usually felt within 10 to 15 minutes. Although smoking and sniffing heroin do not produce a "rush" as quickly or as intensely as intravenous injection, NIDA researchers have confirmed that all three forms of heroin administration are addictive.

short-term effect

Soon after injection (or inhalation), heroin crosses the blood-brain barrier. In the brain, heroin is converted to morphine and binds rapidly to opioid receptors. Abusers typically report feeling a surge of pleasurable sensation, a "rush." The intensity of the rush is a function of how much drug is taken and how rapidly the drug enters the brain and binds to the natural opioid receptors. Short-term effects of heroin

- » "Rush"
- » Depressed respiration
- » Clouded mental functioning
- » Nausea and vomiting
- » Suppression of pain
- » Spontaneous abortion

Heroin is particularly addictive because it enters the brain so rapidly. With heroin, the rush is usually accompanied by a warm flushing of the skin, dry mouth, and a heavy feeling in the extremities, which may be accompanied by nausea, vomiting, and severe itching.

After the initial effects, abusers usually will be drowsy for several hours. Mental function is clouded by heroin's effect on the central nervous system. Cardiac functions slow. Breathing is also severely slowed, sometimes to the point of death. Heroin overdose is a particular risk on the street, where the amount and purity of the drug cannot be accurately known.

long-term effect

What are the long-term effects of heroin use?

One of the most detrimental long-term effects of heroin is addiction itself. Addiction is a chronic, relapsing condition, characterized by compulsive drug seeking and use, and by neurochemical and molecular changes in the brain. Heroin also produces profound degrees of tolerance and physical dependence, which are also powerful motivating factors for compulsive use and abuse. As with abusers of any addictive drug, heroin abusers gradually spend more and more time and energy obtaining and using the drug. Once they are addicted, the heroin abusers' primary purpose in life becomes seeking and using drugs. The drugs literally change their brains. Long-term effects of heroin

- » Addiction
- » Infectious diseases, for example, HIV/AIDS and hepatitis B and C
- » Collapsed veins
- » Bacterial infections
- » Abscesses
- » Infection of heart lining and valves
- » Arthritis and other rheumatic problems

What are the medical complications of chronic heroin use?

Medical consequences of chronic heroin abuse include scarred and/or collapsed veins, bacterial infections of the blood vessels and heart valves, abscesses (boils) and other soft-tissue infections, and liver or kidney disease. Lung complications (including various types of pneumonia and tuberculosis) may result from the poor health condition of the abuser as well as from heroin's depressing effects on respiration. Many of the additives in street heroin may include substances that do not readily dissolve and result in clogging the blood vessels that lead to the lungs, liver, kidneys, or brain. This can cause infection or even death of small patches of cells in vital organs. Immune reactions to these or other contaminants can cause arthritis or other rheumatic problems.

Of course, sharing of injection equipment or fluids can lead to some of the most severe consequences of heroin abuse - infections with hepatitis B and C, HIV, and a host of other blood-borne viruses, which drug abusers can then pass.

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