

Facts About Heroin

What is heroin?

Heroin comes from a group of drugs known as opiates which are made from the opium poppy. Opiates also include opium, morphine and codeine.

What does it look like?

In Australia, heroin can be a fine powder, granules or rocks. It is usually white or off-white in colour, but is sometimes brown.

How does it work?

Heroin affects the brain and specific parts of the body where it attaches to 'opioid receptors'. These opioid receptors are on nerve cells which are especially involved in feelings of pain and pleasure and in controlling heart rate, sleeping, and breathing. Heroin slows down the messages between the brain and the body (it acts as a depressant). As a result, breathing slows down and the heart rate gets slower and can even stop.

How do people use it?

It is usually injected, but can also be snorted or smoked. Sometimes it is mixed with other substances that are not heroin, and this makes it hard for the user to know what they are taking. These other substances can be harmful.

What are the short term effects of heroin?

People who use heroin feel a 'rush' within seconds of injecting or smoking it, or the 'rush' may be delayed up to about five minutes if it is snorted. The short term effects of heroin can last for approximately 3–5 hours.

These include:

pain relief

small (pinned) pupils

euphoria (feeling very happy)

sleepiness

feelings of warmth, relaxation and contentment, followed by feeling very calm or sleepy

nausea (feeling like you want to be sick) and vomiting.

What are the short term harms from heroin?

Some of the short term harms from using heroin can include: if injecting equipment to use heroin is shared, there is an increased chance that the user may be infected with blood-borne viruses, such as hepatitis B and C and HIV. Injecting equipment includes needles, tourniquet, spoon, mix, or swab. increased risk of lung infections and infections of the heart valves. overdose - a person's breathing may slow down so much that they stop breathing.

What are the long term harms of using heroin?

Some of the effects of using heroin long term are:

dependence (addiction) – including withdrawal symptoms if a person stops using (such as severe muscle and bone pain, sleep problems, diarrhoea, vomiting, intense cravings)

dental issues – heroin use can cause a dry mouth which leads to tooth decay over time

irregular periods in women and difficulty becoming pregnant

loss of sex drive and infertility in men

fragile veins from injecting heroin which can collapse or become scarred

increased risk of infection (injecting breaks the skin which makes it easier for bacteria and viruses to enter the blood stream)

increased risk of dying from suicide or trauma

breakdown of relationships with family, friends and community
difficulty keeping a job, staying at school or maintaining cultural obligations

trouble with the law – especially heroin users who become involved with dealing or other illegal activities to support their habit.

Reducing harms from injecting

There are ways to reduce possible harms from injecting heroin such as:

try other ways of using heroin like smoking or snorting

use a new needle and syringe every time

never share injecting gear

always wash hands before and after injecting.

learn how to inject as safely as possible

Overdose

Heroin slows down a person's breathing. If a person has used too much heroin or their body is not used to the amount they have taken, their breathing may slow down so much that there is not enough oxygen going to the brain. This is an overdose. Death from overdose can happen within minutes. The risk of overdose increases if a person has been using other drugs such as alcohol, benzodiazepines, or other opioids such as morphine and oxycodone. Combining heroin with some kinds of antidepressants (tricyclics) and/ or stimulant drugs (e.g. cocaine or methamphetamines) also increases the risk of overdosing. The effects of overdose can be treated with a drug called naloxone, if it is given quickly enough.

Signs of overdose

Signs a person may have overdosed include:

they have blue or purple coloured lips and fingers

their breathing and heart rate have slowed down

they may be impossible to wake up

they are snoring heavily.

What to do in an emergency

If a person looks as if they have overdosed, keep calm and:

put them in the recovery position (on their side)

do what the ambulance officers say

dial triple zero (000) and ask for an ambulance

stay with the person, even after they have revived

Treatment

Treatments available for heroin dependence include:

opioid substitution treatment (users can get drugs by prescription such as methadone, buprenorphine and naltrexone to help them give up heroin)

counselling and withdrawal management

residential rehabilitation.