

WHAT THEY ARE

Opiates are drugs that come from the sap of the opium poppy, a flower native to Europe and East Asia. Some natural opiates are morphine, heroin and codeine. Some synthetic (man-made) drugs mimic the effects of opiates, including Demerol and methadone. All opiates are analgesics, or painkillers, and all are addictive.

Heroin is the main illegal drug in the opiate group. It is usually a white or brownish powder that you dissolve in water and then inject with a needle. Most heroin sold on the street contains only a small percentage of the actual drug, because it's diluted with sugar, quinine, or other drugs or substances. The drug is injected either under the skin ("skin popping") or directly into a vein or muscle.

The other chemicals in heroin can cause even more problems than the heroin itself. You have no way of knowing how pure the heroin is, and therefore no way of knowing the dose you're taking. The other chemicals in heroin also increase the risks of overdose or death.

WHAT THEY DO

Opiates briefly stimulate the higher centres of the brain, giving you an immediate "rush" of pleasure. The drug then depresses the central nervous system, including the brain. This brings on a deep feeling of happiness. You may feel at peace with the world, and forget about pain, depression, and even hunger. Soon after, you'll probably go "on the nod," drifting in and out of a light sleep.

SHORT-TERM EFFECTS

After the initial rush, you may experience drowsiness, dry mouth, intense itchiness and warmth in your skin, and a heavy feeling in your limbs. You'll probably also feel nauseous, and may vomit. Your heartbeat and breathing are slowed, which can lead to death. Your speaking becomes slow and slurred, and your ability to walk properly is impaired. Also, your mental abilities are slowed and impaired, which makes it very unsafe to drive after using heroin.

It's not hard to accidentally overdose on heroin. It can happen when you take a higher concentration of heroin than you realize, or if you combine it with another drug. When you overdose, your skin turns blue and cold, and you can't be woken up. It's not uncommon for overdose to lead to death.

Drug users who share needles are also at high risk of acquiring infections, HIV/AIDS, and Hepatitis B and C, since trace amounts of other users' blood may still be on the needle. Heroin users also often have lung problems, like pneumonia.

Pregnant women who take heroin often have serious complications during pregnancy and childbirth. It's fairly common for these women to have miscarriages, or stillbirths, where the baby is born dead. If the baby survives childbirth, it then has to go through the painful withdrawal process immediately after birth.

And, of course, heroin is illegal. If you import, export, traffic, or possess heroin for the purposes of selling it, you can be punished with up to life imprisonment.

LONG-TERM EFFECTS

All opiates are addictive. This is why even legal opiates, like morphine and codeine, are prescribed only under certain circumstances, and in very limited amounts. Addiction to heroin is its most devastating long-term effect. Along with the frightening short-term effects of the drug, addiction can lead you to forgo everything else in your life (food, clothing, housing, medical care) so you can afford to take heroin as often as possible. This means you're also at risk for malnutrition, and infections.

ADDICTION

Using heroin can make you tolerant to the drug, which means you must use more and more of the drug to get the same effect. Then you begin to crave the drug, and it becomes the centre of your life. You may find yourself sacrificing friends, family, school, and work as you become more desperate to get high again. Eventually you may use heroin simply so you don't feel sick from the withdrawal symptoms. Studies also show that young people who become addicted to drugs have great difficulty learning how to handle their emotions and solve problems; in short, being addicted to a drug makes it more difficult for you to grow into a responsible adult.

As soon as you stop using heroin, you go into withdrawal. Withdrawal symptoms usually include crying, abdominal cramps, and very intense cravings for the drug. These initial symptoms peak at about 3 days but are not completely over for 7 to 10 days. However, the cravings, and symptoms like chronic depression, anxiety, insomnia, loss of appetite, and periods of agitation, may last for months and even years.

HARM REDUCTION

Harm reduction programs are designed to prevent people who use drugs from contracting serious illnesses, from posing a danger to themselves and others, and from dying of overdose. The hope is that they will eventually seek help to get off the drug for good.

Needle exchange programs (NEPs) are operated to try to prevent the sharing of dirty needles. You can bring in a used needle and be given a brand new sterilized needle. Supervised injection sites provide a place where people who use heroin and other injected drugs can get clean needles and inject drugs in a monitored environment, and where they can receive counselling and other assistance that may eventually help them get healthier and reduce or quit their drug use.

Methadone is an opiate used to replace heroin in addicted people. It does not cure the addiction, but it also doesn't have the same side effects as heroin, so it allows you to work and carry on a schedule. Methadone maintenance refers to a program where the addicted person receives methadone regularly instead of the heroin he or she would have taken.

REDUCING THE RISKS

- It's possible to overdose the very first time you try heroin.
- Sharing needles when injecting heroin puts you at risk for HIV, the virus that leads to AIDS or Hepatitis.

BET YOU DIDN'T KNOW

Tylenol 3, a commonly prescribed painkiller, is a combination of acetaminophen and codeine, an opiate. When used incorrectly, Tylenol 3 can also lead to addiction.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- ◇ Do you think it's a good idea to maintain heroin addicts on methadone? Why or why not?
- ◇ Should pregnant women using heroin be forced into treatment? Why or why not?
- ◇ From a pharmacist or doctor, find out the rules for prescribing opiate painkillers.
- ◇ Why do you think that young people who become addicted to drugs have a more difficult time growing into a responsible adult?

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