

Heroin facts

What is heroin?

Heroin is a depressant drug, which means it slows down the messages travelling between your brain and body. Heroin belongs to a group of drugs known as 'opioids' that are from the opium poppy.

Heroin comes in different forms, including:

- Fine white powder
- Coarse off-white granules
- Tiny pieces of light brown 'rock'

Other names

Smack, gear, hammer, the dragon, H, dope, junk, harry, horse, black tar, white dynamite, homebake, china white, Chinese H, poison, Dr Harry

How is it used?

Heroin is usually injected into a vein, but it's also smoked ('chasing the dragon'), and added to cigarettes and cannabis. The effects are usually felt straightaway. Sometimes heroin is snorted – the effects take around 10 to 15 minutes to feel if it's used in this way.

Effects of heroin

There is no safe level of drug use. Use of any drug always carries some risk. It's important to be careful when taking any type of drug.

Heroin affects everyone differently, based on:

- The person's size, weight and health
- Whether the person is used to taking it
- Whether other drugs are taken around the same time
- The amount taken
- The strength of the drug (it varies from batch to batch)

The following effects may be experienced and last for 3 to 5 hours:

- Intense pleasure and pain relief
- Relaxation, drowsiness and clumsiness
- Confusion
- Slurred and slow speech
- Slow breathing and heartbeat

Heroin can cause decreased sex drive, confusion, and slow breathing and heartbeat.

- Dry mouth
- Tiny pupils
- Reduced appetite and vomiting
- Decreased sex drive

Injecting heroin and sharing needles may also cause:

- Tetanus
- Hepatitis B
- Hepatitis C
- HIV and AIDS

If a large amount or a strong batch of heroin is consumed, the following may be experienced:

- Trouble concentrating
- Falling asleep ('going on the nod')
- Wanting to urinate but finding it hard to
- Itchiness
- Irregular heartbeat
- Cold, clammy skin
- Slow breathing, blue lips and fingertips
- Passing out
- Death

Naloxone (also known as Narcan[®]) reverses the effects of heroin, particularly in the case of an overdose. It can be administered by family and friends of people who use opiates. Speak to your chemist or pharmacist for more information.

Coming down

In the days after heroin use, the following may be experienced:

- Irritability
- Depression

Long-term effects

Regular use of heroin may eventually cause:

- Intense sadness
- Irregular periods and difficulty having children (females)
- No sex drive (males)
- Constipation
- Damaged heart, lungs, liver and brain
- Vein damage and skin, heart and lung infections from injecting
- Needing to use more to get the same effect
- Dependence on heroin
- Financial, work or social problems

Using heroin with other drugs

The effects of taking heroin with other drugs – including over-the-counter or prescribed medications – can be unpredictable and dangerous, and could cause:

Heroin + ice, speed or ecstasy: enormous strain on the heart and kidneys, and increased risk of overdose.

Heroin + alcohol, cannabis or benzodiazepines: breathing may slow and eventually stop.

Withdrawal

Giving up heroin after using it for a long time is challenging because the body has to get used to functioning without it. Withdrawal symptoms usually start within 6 to 24 hours after the last dose and can last for about a week – days 1 to 3 will be the worst. These symptoms can include:

- Cravings for heroin
- Restlessness and irritability
- Depression and crying
- Diarrhoea
- Restless sleep and yawning
- Stomach and leg cramps
- Vomiting and no appetite
- Goosebumps

- Runny nose
- Fast heartbeat

Further Information

The Druginfo website has information on:

- Help and support services
- Drug facts
- Treatment
- References for this fact sheet

Go to druginfo.adf.org.au

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