

Heroin

Patient Education Module

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 usually appears as a white or brown powder or as a black sticky substance, known as "black tar heroin." Heroin comes in different forms including: fine white powder; coarse off-white granules; and 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 or 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 straight away. 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. Heroin affects everyone differently, based on: size, weight and health; whether the person is used to taking it; whether other drugs are taken around the same time; the amount taken; and the strength of the drug (varies from batch to batch). The following effects may be experienced and last for 3 to 5 hours:

Drowsiness and clumsiness
Confusion
Slurred and slow speech
Slow breathing
Decreased sex drive

Slow heart rate
Dry mouth
Reduced appetite and vomiting
Tiny pupils

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")
Irregular heartbeat
Death

Itchiness, cold, clammy skin
Wanting to urinate but finding it hard to
Slow breathing, blue lips and finger tips
Passing out

Using heroin with other drugs

The effects of taking heroin with other drugs, prescribed and non-prescribed, 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 resulting in death.

Injecting heroin and sharing needles may cause:

Tetanus
Hepatitis B
Hepatitis C
HIV/AIDS
Skin Infections
Kidney Disease

Endocarditis
Epidural Abscess
Sepsis
Overdose / Death
Liver Disease
Pneumonia

Long-term effects

Regular use of heroin may eventually cause:

Intense sadness

No sex drive (males)

Damaged heart, lungs, liver and brain

Vein damage and skin, heart and lung infections from injecting

Irregular periods and difficulty having children (females)

Constipation

Financial, work or social problems

Dependence on heroin