

Heroin

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Heroin is a highly addictive drug. It is an illegal drug and is the most abused and fast-acting opiate. Opiates are sedative narcotics often used as strong pain relievers, including codeine, morphine and methadone.

As a street drug, heroin is known as “crank,” “H,” “junk,” “horse,” “smack” and “train,” among others.

Pure heroin is a white powder. Street dealers generally sell heroin as a white to brown powder that may be injected, snorted or smoked. The color of heroin varies depending on the substance “cut,” or mixed, with it. Common substances are sugar, starch, powdered milk, quinine, strychnine or other poisons.

Because heroin is mixed with other substances, its purity is unknown. (A black, sticky variety of heroin that comes from Mexico is known as “black tar” heroin.) Users are at an increased risk of overdose because they do not know the strength or contents of the drug.

Addiction

Addiction to heroin can occur after only one use. Heroin actually changes the way the user’s brain works. Heroin changes into morphine when it reaches the brain. This causes a “rush” of pleasurable sensations (euphoria).

The rate that heroin affects the brain depends on how it is used:

- injected into a vein: feelings of euphoria occur within 7 to 8 seconds
- injected into a muscle: feelings of euphoria occur within 5 to 8 minutes
- sniffed or smoked: feelings of euphoria occur within 10 to 15 minutes. (Sniffing and smoking heroin are gaining in popularity.)

The surge of pleasurable sensations depends on how the drug was taken and how quickly the drug affects the brain. In addition to the rush, the user may have a dry mouth, heavy feeling in the arms and legs, upset stomach (nausea), throwing up (vomiting) and severe itching.

After coming down from the high, the user becomes very drowsy. Some users need more heroin to get the same level of pleasure as the first use. This process is known as tolerance. Once addicted, the heroin addict’s life revolves around seeking and using drugs.

Withdrawal symptoms may start a few hours after the last time the drug was taken. Symptoms can include restlessness, muscle and bone pain, being unable to sleep (insomnia), diarrhea, throwing up, cold flashes with goose bumps and leg movements. Symptoms peak between 24 and 48 hours after the last dose and go away in about 1 week. Cravings and relapse can occur months after the withdrawal symptoms are gone.

(over)

Effects of Heroin Use

Heroin can cause the following effects.

■ Short-term:

- warm flushing of the skin, dry mouth, heavy feeling in the arms and legs
- upset stomach, throwing up, severe itching
- drowsiness for several hours
- slowed breathing and heart rate
- clouded mental abilities.

■ Long-term:

- collapsed veins
- infection of the heart lining and valves
- liver or kidney disease
- respiratory problems such as pneumonia and tuberculosis
- boils (abscesses) and other soft-tissue infections
- addiction.

A heroin overdose may cause slow and shallow breathing, convulsions, coma and death.

Medical Complications

The substances added to heroin can clog blood vessels that lead to the lungs, liver, kidneys or brain. Injecting heroin can cause an allergic reaction and put the user at risk for other diseases such as HIV, and hepatitis B and C.

A pregnant woman using heroin is at risk for losing the baby, giving birth early or losing the baby to sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS).

Treatment

There are several options for treating heroin addiction. Options include the following.

- Methadone, a lab-created opiate, is a medicine that blocks the effects of heroin and eliminates withdrawal symptoms for 24 to 36 hours. Another medicine, LAAM (levo-alpha-acetyl-methadol) blocks the effects of heroin for up to 72 hours. Other medicines (naloxone, naltexone and buprenorphine) are also used to treat heroin addiction.
- Contingency management uses a voucher-based system to give the user rewards for staying in treatment and remaining heroin-free. Earning points for drug-free urine tests, the user can exchange the points for items that encourage healthy living.
- Cognitive-behavioral therapy helps the user learn coping skills to help break the cycle. This type of therapy teaches the user to recognize the situations in which he or she is most likely to use heroin, how to avoid those situations, and how to cope with the problems that go with drug abuse.

**Information adapted from the
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