

# HEROIN: THE FACTS

## WHAT IS HEROIN?

Heroin is a drug that comes from the opium poppy and is in the class of drugs called depressants, because it slows down the brain and the central nervous system. It is one of a group of very strong pain-killing drugs called narcotic analgesics or opioids.

Opioid drugs include opium, morphine and codeine. There are other human-made opioid drugs, such as oxycodone, fentanyl and methadone. These drugs can all be used legally when prescribed for medical reasons, but heroin is not legal in Australia.

Heroin is also called smack, skag, hammer, H, horse or gear.

## HOW IS HEROIN USED?

Heroin usually comes in powder form. It can be different colours depending on how refined it is.

Heroin is usually injected, smoked or snorted. It is absorbed into the blood and acts on the brain very quickly.

People who sell heroin often mix or 'cut' the powder with other things that look the same. Some mixed-in substances may have unpleasant or harmful effects. It is difficult to tell what additives are actually in the drug.

## HEROIN RELATED EMERGENCY

If you can't wake someone up or you are concerned that they may have sustained a head injury from a drug related fall – call an ambulance immediately – dial **Triple Zero (000)**.

If the person has been mixing heroin with other drugs, tell the NSW Ambulance paramedic exactly what they have taken. Paramedics are there to help. Generally paramedics don't involve the police **unless** there is danger to themselves or other people/children, someone dies, or a crime (such as violence or theft) has been committed.

## EFFECTS OF HEROIN

What heroin does to you depends on:

- how much you take
  - how often you have been using heroin (the longer you use the more you may build up a tolerance to the effects)
  - when you last took heroin
  - how pure the heroin is
  - your height and weight
  - your general health
  - your past experience with heroin
  - whether you use heroin on its own or with other drugs.
- have long-term and severe constipation
  - get damaged veins from injecting a lot in the same site
  - lose your appetite
  - have your menstrual period irregularly or not at all (women)
  - get skin abscesses (sores with pus)
  - find it difficult to get pregnant (women)
  - find it difficult to get an erection (men)
  - get pneumonia – a serious lung disease
  - have heart and lung problems
  - get tetanus – a disease caused by infection through the places on your body where you inject.

### IMMEDIATE EFFECTS

The effects of heroin may last up to a few hours and can:

- make you feel relaxed and comfortable
- make physical pain disappear
- make you feel nauseous or vomit
- make the pupils in your eyes get smaller (pinpoint pupils)
- make your breathing become slow and shallow
- make you feel sleepy
- make you comatose if you take an overdose
- impair your capacity as a parent/primary carer of children.

### LONG TERM EFFECTS

If you use heroin often for a long time you may:

- overdose (have too much heroin at one time. The longer you use heroin, the more likely you are to overdose!)

The way a person uses heroin can also cause some problems:

- Street heroin is usually mixed with other things, therefore, it is hard to know how strong the heroin is. This can lead to accidental overdose or death.
- Injecting heroin with unsterile injecting equipment makes you more likely to contract blood borne viruses such as HIV, hepatitis B and C, and get blood poisoning (septicaemia) and skin abscesses (sores with pus). NEVER share fits (needles and syringes), spoons, water, filters, alcohol swabs or tourniquets. In NSW, free sterile injecting equipment is available from Needle and Syringe Program (NSP) outlets and from selected pharmacists. Call the Alcohol and Drug Information Service (ADIS) for the nearest NSP outlet.

## MIXING WITH OTHER DRUGS

You are more likely to overdose if you use heroin at the same time as other drugs, especially alcohol or minor tranquillisers (benzodiazepines eg. Valium, Xanax, Serepax).

Mixing other drugs with heroin can also cause other physical and mental problems.

## TOLERANCE AND DEPENDENCE

Anyone can develop a tolerance to heroin or other drugs. Tolerance means that you must take more of the drug to feel the same effects you used to have with smaller amounts.

Dependence on heroin means that it takes up a lot of your thoughts, emotions and activities. You spend a lot of time thinking about using heroin, looking for heroin, using it and getting over the effects of using it. You also find it difficult to stop using or control how much you use. Dependence can lead to a variety of health, money, legal, work and relationship problems.

Not all people who try heroin become dependent. Dependence happens gradually with ongoing use.

# OVERDOSE

Overdose of heroin (dropping) is very common and can happen to anyone. Even small amounts of heroin may cause some people to overdose – for example, new users or those who have started using again. This can happen after even a short time of not using.

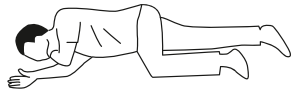
When a person overdoses, they may have:

- very slow breathing, or snoring
- cold skin and low body temperature
- slow heartbeat
- muscle twitching
- slow working of the central nervous system such as being vague or sleepy
- gurgling sound in the throat from vomit or saliva
- blue lips, tips of fingernails or toenails because of low oxygen.

The person may go into a coma or even die.

If someone overdoses, other people with them should:

- phone **Triple Zero (000)** to get an ambulance and tell the operator that the person has overdosed (the police will not come unless the person dies or becomes violent)
- try to keep the person awake – talk to them, use their name
- if the person is unconscious, put them on their side, in the recovery position
- stay with the person and try not to panic.
- check their breathing, clear their airway
- do mouth-to-mouth resuscitation if they stop breathing.



Do **NOT**:

- inject the person with anything – for example ice or speed don't work against the heroin and can cause more harm
- put them under the shower
- walk them around to keep them awake
- put anything in their mouth as it can cause choking and stop them from breathing. Even if someone fits (has a seizure or convulsions), the best thing to do is move things from around them, so they don't hurt themselves.

## PREVENTING OVERDOSE

To help prevent overdose:

- do not use heroin by yourself
- do not use heroin at the same time as alcohol, tranquillisers (sedatives) or other drugs
- if you start using again after a period of abstinence, have a much smaller than usual amount the first few times as your tolerance will have gone down
- after a shot of naloxone (Narcan). The heroin is still in your body and the effect will return in a little while. Another shot of heroin will put you at high risk of doubling up your dose and overdosing again
- if buying heroin from a new dealer or a new batch, try a small amount first to test how strong the heroin is
- be aware of how tolerance can affect you. (See Tolerance and Dependence in this fact sheet)

# PREGNANCY AND BREASTFEEDING

Using heroin during pregnancy can affect both the mother and the unborn child. Heroin taken by a pregnant woman crosses the cord, and can affect fetal development. It increases the risk of miscarriage, premature birth, low birth weight and sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS).

Inform antenatal staff of heroin use and attend regular antenatal checkups. There are specialist services available in NSW as well. [See Information and Advice in this fact sheet] Regular checkups are important because heroin-dependent women are more likely than other women to:

- lose the baby during pregnancy, have the baby too early or have a still born
- have babies with low birth weight
- pass infections, such as HIV, hepatitis B or C or blood poisoning, on to the baby
- have health and social problems during and after pregnancy.

Babies can also have problems after they are born. The baby of a heroin-dependent mother may also be born dependent, and have to go through a withdrawal following birth. In severe cases, medication may be necessary. It is important to get help from health staff on how to care for your baby.

Heroin passes into breast milk, and can cause further adverse effects on a breast-fed baby.

It is generally risky to take any drug while breastfeeding without medical advice.

# WITHDRAWAL

People who are dependent on heroin find it very hard to stop using or cut down because of withdrawal symptoms. These can begin to occur only a few hours after last using heroin.

Symptoms include:

- feeling restless
- yawning
- a runny nose
- nausea
- restless legs

- sweats and chills
- sleeplessness or broken sleep
- crying
- diarrhoea
- low blood pressure
- goosebumps
- stomach and leg cramps
- wanting heroin very badly (cravings).

If you are experiencing problems with withdrawal, contact your doctor or health centre.

# THE LAW

Using heroin is illegal. If you use, sell or give heroin to someone else and get caught, you could face substantial fines and penalties including a prison sentence.

Many overseas countries (eg. Malaysia, Singapore, Thailand) have much harsher penalties – including the death penalty – for people who break their drug laws.

If you are convicted on a drug charge you then have a criminal record. This can cause many other problems such as trouble getting a job, a credit card, or a visa to travel overseas.

# DRIVING UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF HEROIN

Heroin makes it more difficult to drive safely, especially when it is taken with alcohol. It is illegal to drive under the influence of drugs, including heroin. If you break this law you could lose your licence for a set time, or be fined.

Anyone under the influence of heroin who kills or injures another person while driving a motor vehicle, can be sentenced to a term in prison.

# SELF-HELP ASSOCIATIONS

[na.org.au](http://na.org.au) for **Narcotics Anonymous Australia**, a non profit fellowship or society of recovering addicts who meet regularly to help each other stay clean via a program of complete abstinence from all drugs.

## INFORMATION AND ADVICE

For free and confidential advice about alcohol and other drugs 24 hours, 7 days a week, call the **National Alcohol and Other Drug hotline: 1800 250 015**.

It will automatically direct you to the Alcohol and Drug Information Service in the state or territory you are calling from.

**Your room** provides drug and alcohol information and advice, campaigns and resources. Visit [www.yourroom.com.au](http://www.yourroom.com.au)

**Aboriginal Health and Medical Research Council** provides links to Aboriginal community controlled health services across NSW. Visit [www.ahmrc.org.au](http://www.ahmrc.org.au) for information about AHMRC members including a regional map, information and links to members websites.

**Drug and Alcohol Multicultural Education Centre (DAMEC)** provides services for people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities. Contact DAMEC on **(02) 8113 1301** or for counselling and support services for CALD communities call **(02) 8706 0150**.

**Drug Info** provides facts and resources on alcohol and other drugs and the prevention of related harm. Visit [www.druginfo.adf.org.au](http://www.druginfo.adf.org.au)

**State Library of New South Wales Drug Info** provides up to date information on alcohol and other drugs in public libraries throughout NSW. Visit [www.druginfo.sl.nsw.gov.au](http://www.druginfo.sl.nsw.gov.au)

**eheadspace** provides mental health and wellbeing support, information and services for young people (12-25 years) and their family and friends. Visit [www.eheadspace.org.au](http://www.eheadspace.org.au)

**Family Drug Support** provides 24-7 telephone support to families in crisis due to drug and alcohol issues. Call the Helpline on **1300 368 186** or visit [www.fds.org.au](http://www.fds.org.au)

**Kids Helpline** is a free, 24 hour counselling service for young people aged 5 to 25 years. Counselling is offered via the Kids Helpline website [www.kidshelp.com.au](http://www.kidshelp.com.au) or email, or call **1800 55 1800**.

**Nepean Youth Drug and Alcohol Service (NYDAS)** works within a holistic model of care to address a range of issues for young people (12 -20 years of age) related to their alcohol and other drug use. Call **(02) 4734 2129** or **(02) 4734 1333**.

**NSW Users and AIDS Association (NUAA)** is a peak drug user organisation in NSW providing harm reduction information and blood borne virus prevention peer education. Visit [www.nuaa.org.au](http://www.nuaa.org.au)

**Poisons Information Centre** is a 24/7 call centre service available across Australia. Call **13 11 26**

**ReachOut** is an Australian online youth mental health service with a mobile-friendly site and forums where you can access help, information and support. Visit [au.reachout.com](http://au.reachout.com)

**Sexual Health Info Link** provides free and confidential sexual health support and information. Visit [www.shil.nsw.gov.au](http://www.shil.nsw.gov.au)

**TAFE NSW** provides help with education, career development or personal matters. Students can contact a local TAFE/ university counsellor. Visit [www.tafensw.edu.au](http://www.tafensw.edu.au)

**Youth Action** is the peak organisation for young people in NSW. Visit [www.youthaction.org.au](http://www.youthaction.org.au) and use the search option to access a directory of NSW youth services.

**Youth Solutions** provides services for young people 12 to 25 years of age and the community including prevention and health promotion, drug and alcohol education, community programs and information and referral. Visit [www.youthsolutions.com.au](http://www.youthsolutions.com.au) or call **(02) 4628 2319** [provides services to young people in Macarthur & Wingecarribee].

**NSW Health aims to reduce drug-related harm for individuals and the community by providing the facts, including the possible health, social and economic consequences of using alcohol and other drugs.**

A range of drug and alcohol fact sheets is available for download at: [www.yourroom.com.au](http://www.yourroom.com.au)