

# Heroin

## Slang terms

A-bomb, antifreeze, Aries, Aunt Hazel, bad seed, ballot, H, Bin Laden, black pearl, black tar, blanco, china white, crank, dirt, dope, dust, fix, Big Harry, horse, home-bake, junk, mother pearl, skag, snow, whack, horse, smack, skag, dragon, H and hammer are the most common terms used in Australia at present. They vary, however, from country to country and city to city.

## What is Heroin?

Heroin is one of a group of drugs known as "opioids" or narcotic analgesics. Other opioids include opium, morphine, codeine, pethidine, oxycodone, buprenorphine and methadone. They are strong painkillers and highly addictive.

*Buprenorphine ('bup', 'B') is available by prescription, under the name of Subutex, as a treatment for heroin dependence. It has been found to be effective in reducing the need to continue using heroin (buprenorphine maintenance) and also in helping people to withdraw from heroin and methadone. Buprenorphine is also prescribed to treat severe pain.*

Heroin and other opioids are depressants. Depressants do not necessarily make you feel depressed. Rather, they slow down the activity of the central nervous system and messages going to and from the brain and the body.

The opioid family includes:

**Heroin** - Manufactured from morphine or codeine by a chemical process, but is stronger than morphine.

**Morphine and Codeine** - Natural chemical found in opium resin.

**Opium** - A sticky resin that comes from the poppy seed. People have used it for thousands of years for pleasure & pain relief.

**Pethidine and Methadone** - Artificially made drugs that have similar effects to heroin and morphine. Pethidine is often used as a painkiller after surgery. Methadone is used in Australia in the treatment of people who are dependent on heroin.

## Immediate effects

All opioids are quick acting. The effects vary with the amount, strength and type of drug taken and the way it is taken.

The effects which can last from two to three hours to 24 hours include:

- Nausea & vomiting
- Slurred and slow speech
- Strong feelings of well-being
- Narrowing of the pupils of the eyes
- Shallow breathing
- Drowsiness
- Decreased appetite
- Decreased blood pressure and heart rate
- Pain relief
- Confusion
- Dry mouth
- suppressed cough reflex
- Reduced sexual urges
- Reduced coordination

## Health effects

Most of the damaging effects of illegal use of intravenous drugs like heroin occur because of:

- The way the drug is used (i.e. by injection)
- Other, often dangerous substances that are mixed with ('cut') street drugs.
- Poor hygiene & nutrition
- The street lifestyle
- Infections or disease passed from one drug user to another

These health problems include:

- Hepatitis C
- Infertility
- Malnutrition
- AIDS
- Abscesses
- Overdose
- Collapsed veins
- Tooth decay
- Brain damage
- Loss of sex drive
- Tetanus
- Bronchitis
- Pneumonia
- Ulcers

## Dependence and withdrawal

Heroin is a highly addictive drug. Using a drug like heroin increases the risk of becoming dependent on it. Dependence on heroin can be psychological, physical or both.

People who are **psychologically dependent** on heroin find that using it becomes far more important than other activities in their lives. They crave the drug and will find it very difficult to stop using it, or even to cut down on the amount they use.

People who are **physically dependent** on heroin find that their body has become used to functioning with the drug present.

If a dependent person suddenly stops taking heroin, or severely cuts down the amount they use, they will experience withdrawal symptoms because their body has to readjust to functioning without the drug. This usually occurs within a few hours after last use. Withdrawal starts when a person stops using the drug they are dependent on. Withdrawal from heroin is usually uncomfortable, but rarely causes death. There is less danger withdrawing from heroin than from alcohol or barbiturates. Withdrawal symptoms can include:

- a craving for the drug
- restlessness
- yawning
- low blood pressure
- elevated heart rate
- stomach and leg cramps, muscle spasms
- loss of appetite, vomiting and diarrhoea
- goose bumps
- tears and a runny nose
- increased irritability
- insomnia
- depression.

These withdrawal symptoms get stronger and usually peak around 2 to 4 days after last use. Sudden withdrawal from heroin rarely causes direct death, unless the user is also using other drugs and is in poor health. Withdrawal from heroin or opioids is much less dangerous than withdrawal from some other drugs like alcohol or benzodiazepines.

## The law

Heroin is illegal in Australia. Using, keeping, selling or giving heroin to someone else is illegal. If you are caught you could get penalties starting from a \$3,000 fine and/or two years in jail to a \$500,000 fine and/or jail for life.

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

## Motor skills

Heroin is a depressant drug, which means it slows down your body's central nervous system. This in turn affects concentration, balance and coordination. Heroin will affect a person's ability to drive any kind of vehicle or operate machinery. When combined with other depressant drugs such as alcohol or cannabis, it is even more dangerous resulting in a coma or even death.

## Work

Once a person becomes dependent on heroin, holding down a job can be very difficult. It can seem more important to get the drugs they need than to go to work, or to be efficient or reliable when they do. Employers can dismiss a person caught using illegal drugs at work or who is convicted of a drug charge. Once a person has a criminal record, getting another job can also be very difficult.

## Relationships

Illegal use of any drugs often leads to problems with family and friends. They often find it difficult to understand someone else's addiction and their changes in mood and behaviour. Legal and financial problems, cheating and lying, family fights, stealing, anxiety, paranoia and fear all add to the strain on relationships.

It can be especially hard for family and friends to keep helping someone who is dependent on drugs.

## References

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