



# Heroin and psychosis

## What is heroin?

Heroin is one of the group of drugs known as opiates. Other opiates include opium, morphine, codeine, pethidine, and methadone. It originates from the opium poppy.

Heroin is a depressant and slows down the central nervous system and messages going to and from the brain.

Heroin is white to off white granules or pieces of rock. It is usually packaged in foil or capsules. The substance is put on a spoon with water and is heated, dissolved and sterilised and is then injected into a vein. Ground into powder, it can be smoked ('chasing the dragon') or inhaled (snorted) into the nose.

Heroin's impact will vary from person to person and relates to the degree of slowing down of the central nervous system and the danger involved. It will depend on factors such as weight, health, how it is taken (ie injected or smoked), how much is used, the environment (alone, with other people who are able to notice if someone is becoming unwell and act on it) and whether other drugs or alcohol are taken at the same time.

## The immediate effects of heroin

- Instant pleasure
- Pain relief
- Anxiety relief
- Breathing, blood pressure and heart rate slowed down
- Pupils get smaller
- Mouth dries out

- Person becomes drowsy/sleeps
- Nausea and vomiting
- Person becomes sweaty and itchy
- Lasts for three to four hours.

## The long term effects of heroin

- Pure heroin is non-toxic to the body, however most heroin is mixed with unknown substances that are often toxic causing collapsed veins, tetanus, abscesses and damage to the lungs, liver, brain and heart.
- Heroin is highly addictive and regular users are likely to become dependant on it, even after a few days.
- Constipation
- Infertility in women
- Loss of libido in men
- Social consequences of heroin dependence include poverty, increased contact with the criminal justice system, increased vulnerability to violence and corruption
- Malnutrition
- Susceptibility to infection due to lowered immune system
- Accidental death and overdose is common because it is difficult to know the purity of heroin on the street
- Hepatitis C and HIV.

## Withdrawal symptoms of heroin

Withdrawal symptoms occur because the body has to readjust to functioning without the drug. They usually occur within a few hours after last use and peak around two to four days after last use. They usually

subside after six to seven days but some symptoms (craving, loss of appetite, insomnia, depression) may continue for months and even years. Withdrawal symptoms are like flu symptoms and include:

- Stomach and leg cramps
- Vomiting
- Goose bumps
- Runny nose
- Irritability
- Insomnia
- Loss of appetite
- Increased heart rate
- Muscle spasms
- Depression.

## Why do people with mental illness use heroin?

Research shows that people with mental illnesses use drugs and alcohol for the same reason as the rest of the population. These reasons include:

- Makes people feel good
- Makes people feel different to how they feel the rest of the time
- Euphoria
- Social reasons
- Reduction of anxiety
- Physical dependence

However, the impact of drug use for someone with a mental illness is greater due to the symptoms and social consequences of the mental illness.

## How does heroin affect psychosis?

Heroin is an opioid. Opioids have been used in the past with some success in the treatment of psychosis. Heroin and related opioid substances produce specific effects on the dopaminergic pathways that are believed to be involved in the pathogenesis of psychotic symptoms. Heroin is thought to have antipsychotic properties.

- Some people with psychotic symptoms report that heroin improves the negative symptoms of schizophrenia (apathy, withdrawal, loss of pleasure)
- Some people report that heroin, like antipsychotic medications, improves the positive symptoms of psychosis (auditory hallucination, delusions)
- People with psychotic symptoms report feeling calmer and less agitated immediately after using heroin
- Once withdrawal from heroin begins, the psychotic symptoms become much worse than before using the heroin. People begin to feel more agitated and become more anxious than prior to using the heroin.

## What can family and friends do?

People with a mental illness who use heroin are severely impairing their chances of recovery. They are likely to exacerbate their symptoms and will limit the effectiveness of any treatment.

Family members can help the situation by:

- Setting limits on the person's behaviour eg parents might prohibit the using of cannabis anywhere in the family home. While setting limits is likely to cause some initial anger, it might also minimise the damage done by the drug in the long term
- Learning more about drugs and their different effects and learning more about effective interventions for problematic drug uses, eg stages of change and the process it takes for someone to change their drug behaviour
- Learn to better read the symptoms of drug use so that interventions can be more considered and timely.

## Useful references

beyondblue:  
the national depression initiative  
[www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au)

Australian Drug Foundation  
[www.adf.org.au](http://www.adf.org.au)

## Mental Illness Fellowships of Australia fact sheets

What can family and friends do to help a person experiencing mental illness?

Family and carer support services

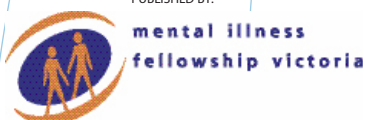
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Signs of mental illness and what to do

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