
Heroin and your mental health

What is Heroin?

Heroin is an opiate. Other opiates include methadone, morphine, pethidine and codeine. Opiates are depressant drugs, which slow down the activity of the central nervous system.

Other names for Heroin

Smack, skag, H, junk, hammer, gear, horse, dope.

How does Heroin affect you?

- Heroin affects the central nervous system by slowing down messages to the brain.
- Heroin is transported to the brain via the blood stream, usually by injecting into the veins or through the lining of the lungs if smoked.
- The immediate effects are intense pleasure, pain relief, drowsiness and nausea. Breathing and pulse become slower.
- Blood pressure drops. This can lead to overdose, brain damage from lack of oxygen or death.

Heroin and your mental health

- If you use heroin and have symptoms of depression or anxiety, these symptoms are likely to increase.
- Using heroin may make you feel more disorganized and out of control.
- If you have a history of psychosis and use heroin, you may experience more hallucinations and strange beliefs especially during withdrawal from the drug.
- Heroin can interfere with the effectiveness of your psychiatric medication. Heroin use can cause a lot of stress in your life (e.g. debt, conflict in your relationships, and problems with the law or other drug users) and your mental health is more likely to get worse when you feel under pressure.

Heroin and other drugs

- Using heroin with other drugs or medication can increase the likelihood that you will experience unexpected risks – even if you use them several hours apart.
- Always tell your doctor if you use heroin to make sure you reduce your risk of harm.

Using heroin with other depressants such as alcohol, other opiates (e.g. methadone), benzodiazepines (e.g. Valium) or other prescribed medication can result in overdose and death.

Heroin and pregnancy

- Heroin can harm an unborn child. Heroin crosses the placenta and your baby may become dependent on the drug.
- Using heroin during the pregnancy increases the risk of miscarriage or Sudden Infant Death Syndrome after birth.
- Methadone treatment is considered to be safer for mother and the unborn child than continued use of heroin.

Heroin use and the law

It is illegal to possess, use, supply or manufacture heroin in all States and Territories. If you are charged, seek legal advice.

What happens when you stop using Heroin?

If you have been using heroin regularly you are very likely to experience withdrawal symptoms when you stop. The first 3 – 4 days are usually the most difficult. Withdrawal symptoms may include:

- Runny nose
- Sore throat
- Heavy sweating
- Temperature changes
- Stomach pain
- Aching bones and joints
- Cramps
- Strong cravings
- Diarrhoea and vomiting
- Irritability
- Loss of appetite
- Sleeping difficulties
- Bizarre or disturbing dreams

Most of these symptoms ease after 6 – 7 days but some, such as depression, anxiety and insomnia, may take a longer time to pass. If symptoms don't improve, contact your doctor.

Substance Use & Mental Illness Treatment Team
Building 5
34 – 54 Poplar Road
Parkville Victoria 3052

PO Box 7000
Carlton South
Victoria 3053
T 03 8387 2202
F 03 8387 2667
E summitt@mh.org.au

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Reducing harm from Heroin

- Burning (chasing the dragon) is safer than injecting, but you can still become dependent and risk overdosing when burning the drug.
- Do not use any equipment when burning that is toxic, such as a plastic spoon.
- If you inject, always use new fits. Bleaching is the last resort.
- Never share your injecting equipment, including the spoon, water, filter and tourniquet.
- Avoid using alone in case you overdose.
- Don't use cigarette filters – they contain fibreglass, which can damage your veins. Use a filter wheel, or a small ball of cotton wool or tampon to filter the heroin.

What to do if your friend passes out?

- If the person is unconscious, check their airway is clear, place them on their side and into the recovery position.
- Call an ambulance on 000 and stay with them.
- If breathing has stopped, give mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.
- If there is no pulse, start applying CPR if you are trained.

Conclusion

Heroin can worsen symptoms associated with mental illness.

Useful phone numbers

Emergency **000**
Direct Line **1800 888 236**
Drug Info **1300 858 584**
Moreland Hall (Northern Region) **03 9386 2876**
DAS West (Western Region) **03 8345 6682**
Voyage (Western Region) **03 9296 1228**
Hepatitis C Helpline **03 9349 1111**
Suicide Helpline **1300 651 251**
Smoking Quitline **13 18 48**
Family Drug Help **1300 660 068**

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Information contained in this pamphlet is offered for general purposes and should not be considered as substitute advice from your case manager, drug and alcohol worker or doctor.

SUMITT is a Victorian dual diagnosis service, providing direct clinical care, consultation and training on co-occurring substance use and mental illness.

www.dualdiagnosis.mh.org.au

