

WHAT'S SMACK GOT TO DO WITH IT ?



IMPORTANT INFORMATION FOR PEOPLE WITH MENTAL OR EMOTIONAL PROBLEMS

Heroin (smack, skag, dope, H, junk, hammer, slow, gear, Harry or horse) is one of a group of drugs known as 'opiates' or 'narcotic analgesics'.

Like other drugs, heroin effects different people in different ways. It depends on your *size*, your *weight*, your state of health, *how you take it*, how *much* you take, whether you are used to it, how you are feeling at the time and what *other drugs are in your body*.

The effects also depend on the situation - for example, whether you are alone or in a social setting.

Opiates like heroin, morphine or pethidine slow down your nervous system and the messages going between your brain and your body. They block physical, mental and emotional responses.

Sudden withdrawal from heroin won't kill you, unless you are using other drugs at the same time, or you are in poor health.

It is much less dangerous than withdrawal from drugs like alcohol or benzodiazepines.

HEROIN & MENTAL HEALTH

Pure heroin given under medical supervision does not cause mental illness and it does relatively little damage to the various organs of the body. But heroin that is *not* pure or that is taken by someone who is already ill or unfit can make

their condition much worse.

People you have emotional problems such as depression, anxiety or mental illness have a much poorer chance of recovery while they are using. Concentration, the ability to remember or follow through with treatment, are impaired by heroin use and medication loses its effectiveness.

Early treatment for mental problems gives much better results. Heroin hides the symptoms of some mental illnesses, which means users might not get treatment early enough to prevent long-term harm.

DEPRESSION, ANXIETY & HEROIN

Regular users of depressant drugs often feel like their lives have lost meaning. They can lose all their self-respect and even become suicidal.

Withdrawing from heroin is unpleasant but the anxiety which goes along with the it and what withdrawal does to your nervous system can lead to panic attacks. It is even possible for users to become paranoid.

Heroin & Emotions: Heroin produces its sudden, intense feelings of pleasure and the a sense of well-being and calm drowsiness that follows by

working on the *limbic system* (the a part of your brain that controls emotions). This usually last for 3 or 4 hours, but the after-effect is the opposite:

restlessness, agitation & cravings. These withdrawal symptoms usually reach a peak by the fourth day. The irritability, insomnia, loss of appetite, vomiting, elevated heart rate, muscle spasms and emotional depression start to subside after 6 or 7 days, but depression, anxiety, insomnia, loss of appetite, periods of agitation and a continued craving for the drug may last for periods of months and even years.

SCHIZOPHRENIA AND HEROIN

The main symptoms of schizophrenia are hallucinations (especially hearing voices that other people do not hear), delusions (persistent, false ideas) and difficulty thinking, with thoughts and words becoming scrambled. Opioids like heroin were once given to try to control these symptoms. They worked, but the treatment wore off very quickly and the addiction became as big a problem as the mental illness. Schizophrenia is more common among heroin users, who use it as a kind of self-medication. Because heroin

Heroin masks the symptoms of several mental illnesses, making it unlikely that the user will get treatment early enough to prevent long term harm.

...depression, anxiety, insomnia, loss of appetite, periods of agitation and a continued craving for the drug, may last for periods of months and even years.

reduces the distress caused by hallucinations and other symptoms of schizophrenia, treatment with more effective medications is often left too long, and instead of getting the problem under control, it is left until it becomes chronic and much harder to manage.

BIPOLAR DISORDER AND HEROIN

What is true of schizophrenia is also true of bipolar disorder (manic-depressive illness). In addition, the anxiety and stress of the lifestyle of many heroin users becomes a trigger for mood swings.

These mood swings are mimicked by the rush of intense pleasure and the strong feeling of wellbeing which heroin gives, and by the loss of appetite, energy, hunger and sexual urges that follow. These plus the swings in mood between being stoned, drying out, hassling for drugs, avoiding the law, hiding your habit, trying to score, watching what is happening to friends and family all help to mask the bipolar illness.

Heroin doesn't seem to be the first choice for people with bipolar disorder. Those who do use heroin find it is a lot harder to overcome their illness, even with medication. Heroin stops mood stabilising drugs (like lithium) working properly, and can make you quite ill if you use heroin at the same time.

IS HEROIN ADDICTIVE?

Of course it is. It is one of the most addictive substances we

know about! Regular users become dependent on it after just a few days and many go on to suffer long-term social and physical effects of addiction.

Users often spend less on things like housing and food and, combined with reduced appetite, this can lead to malnutrition, infection, and legal problems.

IS HEROIN A DANGEROUS DRUG?

Heroin rarely comes in a pure form. Street heroin is a mixture of substances, such as caffeine, sugar, strychnine, even ground glass!

Additives can be very poisonous, causing collapsed veins, tetanus, abscesses. They damage the heart, lungs, liver and brain. Because the users can't know the purity, or how much they are really getting, it is easy to accidentally overdose and even die.

The way that people store and use the drug only adds to the health risks, and the combined effects of the drug and the drug lifestyle results in high rates of AIDS, hepatitis and other illnesses.

HEROIN AND OTHER DRUGS

Heroin combines with other depressant drugs (like alcohol, benzos or other opiates) which increases the risks. A relatively low quantity

of heroin can easily become an overdose if it is taken with other drugs.

Heroin & Marijuana ~

Marijuana causes the heart to race, but reduces the amount of oxygen in the bloodstream. That plus its sedative effects combines with heroin to make an overdose a lot more likely.

Heroin & Alcohol ~

Opiates plus alcohol boosts the sedative effect of both and increases the risk of a fatal overdose. **Drinking alcohol is the main cause of heroin overdose and death!** Other sedatives (sleeping pills, anxiety medications and some antidepressants) are also dangerous

Heroin & Stimulants

Speed, cocaine and ecstasy, along with less potent stimulants like Sudafed combine with H to have a very dangerous effect on the heart and blood pressure. They can be a lethal combination.

Psychiatric Medications and Withdrawal ~

Reducing heroin use or withdrawal needs special care if you are taking medication. A number of medications reduce the body's resistance to seizures (fits), including antipsychotic medications, some anxiety drugs and a number of antidepressants. Your best safeguard is to make sure your medical advisor or drug counsellor knows what you are taking. If you see a mental health counsellor, be sure they understand your heroin use, including how much and how often you use!

Opioids were once given to try to control illnesses like schizophrenia, but the effects wore off very quickly and the addiction became as big a problem as the mental illness.



This client information leaflet was designed and written by the Midas Dual Disorder Service, South Western Sydney Area Health Service. It may be freely copied and distributed provided this notice and the SWSAHS Logo remain part of the document.



David Rich Clinical Nurse Consultant