

What is heroin?

Heroin is a highly addictive and rapidly acting opiate (a drug that is derived from opium). Specifically, heroin is produced from morphine, which is a principal component of opium. Opium is a naturally occurring substance that is extracted from the seedpod of the opium poppy.

What does it look like?

The appearance of heroin can vary dramatically. In the eastern United States, heroin generally is sold as a powder that is white (or off-white) in color. (Generally, the purer the heroin the whiter the color, because variations in color result from the presence of impurities.) In the western United States, most of the heroin available is a solid substance that is black in color. This type of heroin, known as black tar, may be sticky (like tar) or hard to the touch. Powdered heroin that is a dirty brown color also is sold in the western United States.

Who uses heroin?

Individuals of all ages use heroin—data reported in the National Household Survey on Drug Abuse indicate that an estimated 3,091,000 U.S. residents aged 12 and older have used heroin at least once in their lifetime. The survey also revealed that many teenagers and young adults have used heroin at least once—76,000 individuals aged 12 to 17 and 474,000 individuals aged 18 to 25.

Heroin use among high school students is a particular problem. Nearly 2 percent of high school seniors in the United States used the drug at least once in their lifetime, and nearly half of those injected the drug, according to the University of Michigan's Monitoring the Future Survey.

How is heroin abused?

Heroin is injected, snorted, or smoked. Many new, younger users begin by snorting or smoking heroin because they wish to avoid the social stigma attached to injection drug use. These users often mistakenly believe that snorting or smoking heroin will not lead to addiction. Users who snort or smoke heroin at times graduate to injection because as their bodies become conditioned to the drug, the effects it produces are less intense. They then turn to injection—a more efficient means of administering the drug—to try to attain the more intense effects they experienced when they began using the drug.

What are the risks?

Both new and experienced users risk overdosing on heroin because it is impossible for them to know the purity of the heroin they are using. (Heroin sold on the street often is mixed with other substances such as sugar, starch, or quinine. An added risk results when heroin is mixed with poisons such as strychnine.) Heroin overdoses—which can result whether the drug is snorted, smoked, or injected—can cause slow and shallow breathing, convulsions, coma, and even death.

All heroin users—not just those who inject the drug—risk becoming addicted. Individuals who abuse heroin over time develop a tolerance for the drug, meaning that they must use increasingly larger doses to achieve the same intensity or effect they experienced when they first began using the drug. Heroin ceases to produce feelings of pleasure in users who develop tolerance; instead, these users must continue taking the drug simply to feel normal. Addicted individuals who stop using the drug may experience withdrawal symptoms, which include heroin craving, restlessness, muscle and bone pain, and vomiting.

Heroin users who inject the drug expose themselves to additional risks, including contracting human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), hepatitis B and C, and other blood-borne viruses. Chronic users who inject heroin also risk scarred or collapsed veins, infection of the heart lining and valves, abscesses, pneumonia, tuberculosis, and liver and kidney disease.

Street Terms for Heroin

Big H	Hell dust
Boy	Horse
Capital H	Junk
China white	Mexican horse
Chiva	Mud
Dead on arrival	Poppy
Diesel	Smack
Dope	Thunder
Eighth	Train
Good H	White junk
H	



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Is heroin illegal?

Yes, heroin is illegal. Heroin is a Schedule I substance under the Controlled Substances Act. Schedule I drugs have a high potential for abuse and serve no legitimate medical purpose in the United States.

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Heroin Fast Facts



Questions and Answers



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