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HEROIN

Heroin is a highly addictive drug derived from morphine, which is obtained from the opium poppy. It is a “downer” that affects the brain’s pleasure systems and interferes with the brain’s ability to perceive pain. Heroin can be used in a variety of ways, depending on user preference and the purity of the drug. Heroin can be injected into a vein (“mainlining”), injected into a muscle, smoked in a water pipe or standard pipe, mixed in a marijuana joint or regular cigarette, inhaled as smoke through a straw, known as “chasing the dragon”, or inhaled as powder via the nose. One form of heroin is known as “china white”.

Heroin is a fast-acting drug, especially when injected or smoked. Injected heroin reaches the brain in 15 to 30 seconds; smoked heroin reaches the brain in 7 seconds. The high from heroin is experienced as intense pleasure. Once a person begins using heroin, they quickly develop a tolerance to the drug and need more and more to get the same effect.

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF USE

The signs and symptoms of heroin use include euphoria, drowsiness, respiratory depression (which can progress until breathing stops), constricted pupils, and nausea. Withdrawal symptoms include watery eyes, runny nose, yawning, loss of appetite, tremors, panic, chills, sweating, nausea, muscle cramps, and insomnia. Elevations in blood pressure, pulse, respiratory rate, and temperature occur as withdrawal progresses. Symptoms of a heroin overdose include shallow breathing, pinpoint pupils, clammy skin, convulsions, and coma.

NEGATIVE EFFECTS

- slowed and slurred speech
- slow gait
- impaired night vision, droopy eyelids, constricted pupils
- dry skin, itching, skin infections
- vomiting
- constipation
- “nodding off” (at very high doses)
- decreased sexual pleasure, indifference to sex, menstrual irregularity
- sedation proceeding to coma, even death from overdose
- respiratory depression
- HIV infection from injection
- can impair immune system addiction
- reduced appetite
- slow, irregular heart rate
- irregular blood pressure

Heroin is purer now than it has ever been. In 1980 the average bag of street heroin was 4% pure; the average street bag today is 40% pure and can be as pure as 70%. Increased purity results in users snorting and smoking rather than injecting the drug. Sellers cut and package heroin for injectors and for inhalers differently. Purity is lower in the South and West than in the Northeast and Midwest.

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