

Drug Facts: HEROIN



Years ago, thoughts of using a needle kept many potential heroin users at bay. Not anymore. Today's heroin is so pure, users can smoke it or snort it, causing more kids under 18 to use it. Kids who snort or smoke heroin face the same high risk of overdose and death that haunts intravenous users. Yet 40% of high school seniors polled do not believe there is great risk in trying heroin.

Recent studies suggest a shift from injecting to snorting or smoking heroin because of increased purity and the misconception that these forms of use will not lead to addiction.

Heroin is processed from morphine, a naturally occurring substance extracted from the seed-pod of the Asian poppy plant. Heroin usually appears as a white or brown powder. Street names associated with heroin include "smack," "H," "skag," and "junk." Other names may refer to types of heroin produced in a specific geographical area, such as "Mexican black tar."

The short-term effects of heroin abuse appear soon after a single dose and disappear in a few hours. After an injection of heroin, the user reports feeling a surge of euphoria ("rush") accompanied by a warm flushing of the skin, a dry mouth, and heavy extremities. Following this initial euphoria, the user goes "on the nod," an alternately wakeful and drowsy state. Mental functioning becomes clouded due to the depression of the central nervous system.

HEALTH HAZARDS

Irreversible effects. Heroin abuse is associated with serious health conditions, including fatal overdose, spontaneous abortion, collapsed veins, and infectious diseases, including HIV/AIDS and hepatitis.

Long-term effects. Long-term effects of heroin include collapsed veins, infection of the heart lining and valves, abscesses, cellulitis, and liver disease. Pulmonary complications, including various types of pneumonia, may result from the poor health condition of the abuser, as well as from heroin's depressing effects on respiration.

Infection. In addition to the effects of the drug itself, street heroin may have additives that do not readily dissolve and result in clogging the blood vessels that lead to the lungs, liver, kidneys, or brain. This can cause infection or even death of small patches of cells in vital organs.