

Substance Use, Abuse and Dependence

Classification and Information on Substances

Opiates (Heroin)

DESCRIPTION	Heroin is a morphine derivative. In pure form it is a white powder with a bitter taste. Street heroin may vary in colour depending on impurities and additives.
MODE OF ADMINISTRATION	Historically heroin was most frequently administered intravenously by injecting it. Today, heroin is mostly inhaled intra-nasally by snorting it or orally by smoking it.
PRIMARY EFFECT	Central nervous system depressant and analgesic.
SHORT-TERM EFFECTS	<p>The effects of heroin use are experienced within 7 to 8 seconds when injected and within a couple of minutes when snorted or smoked. The following effects are usually present:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Slow and irregular heart beat and irregular blood pressure; • Increased feelings of warmth, intense pleasure and dulling of pain; • Constricted pupils and reduced night vision; • Relaxation and drowsiness; • Slurred speech; • Dry mouth; • Itchy skin (especially the face and nose); • Slowed breathing; • Delayed reaction time; • Loss of concentration and diminished short-term memory; • Impaired judgement; • Constipation and loss of appetite; • Reduced sex drive; • Possible injury when incapacitated; • In large doses, nausea, vomiting, respiratory paralysis, heart attack, stroke, anaphylactic shock, coma and death; • Overdose likely when used concurrently with other central nervous system depressants such as alcohol.
LONG-TERM EFFECTS	<p>Heavy and continued use can lead to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skin infections (including dry and itchy skin, and skin abscesses); • Fatigue; • Respiratory problems (including laboured or noisy breathing due to excessive fluid in the lungs); • Scarring and collapse of veins if injecting; • Extreme withdrawal when not using (including hypothermia, stomach cramps, insomnia, diarrhea and vomiting); • Cognitive impairments (including concentration, attention and memory); • Malnutrition and muscle wasting (including suppression of the immune system); • Psychiatric complications (including depression, anxiety, sexual dysfunction, insomnia, psychosis and suicidal behaviour); • Increased risk of contracting hepatitis and HIV when sharing needles; • Risk of injury.
ADDICTION POTENTIAL	High psychological and physical addiction potential.
TREATMENT OPTIONS	In cases of heavy and prolonged use, inpatient and/or outpatient treatment with the use of multiple therapeutic methods (individual, family and group psychotherapy) is usually necessary to achieve lasting abstinence. Withdrawal symptoms are treated medically and co-morbid conditions are treated if required.