Opium.

What is opium?

Opium is a depressant drug, which means it slows down the messages travelling between your brain and body. The opium poppy (*Papaver somniferum* L.) from which opium is derived is one of the earliest plants of which there is recorded medicinal use.¹ Evidence of opium cultivation by the Sumerian people dates to 3400BCE, although some scholars believe opium use predates Sumerian culture.²

Opium poppy pods hold a milky substance called latex that contains a number of chemicals, including morphine and codeine.¹ Latex is extracted from the opium pods and dried to create opium. Typically, it is further refined by boiling and drying again.¹,²

What does it look like?

Opium is a sticky dark-brown gum with a strong odour. It can also be manufactured into a liquid or powder.¹,²

Slang names

Aunti, Aunti Emma, Big O, O, Black pill, Chandu, Chinese Molasses, Dopium, Dream Gun, Fi-Do-Nie, Gee, Guma, Midnight Oil, Zero.

Other types of opioids

- Buprenorphine
- Codeine
- Fentanyl
- Heroin
- Methadone
- Naloxone
- Oxycodone

How is opium used?

Opium may be smoked, eaten raw or as a pill, or made into a tincture for drinking.¹,²

Opium can be manufactured into heroin and is a prerequisite for heroin production.
Effects of opium

There is no safe level of drug use. Use of any drug always carries some risk. It’s important to be careful when taking any type of drug.

Opium affects everyone differently, based on:

- the person’s size, weight and health
- regularity of use
- whether other drugs are taken around the same time
- the amount taken
- the strength of the drug (which varies between batches).

Short term effects may include:

- euphoria
- relaxation
- analgesia
- slower, shallower breathing
- lower heart rate
- impaired reflexes
- temporary constipation
- loss of appetite.3, 4

Overdose

If you take a large amount of opium, you could overdose. Call an ambulance straight away by dialling triple zero (000) if you or another person have any of these symptoms (ambulance officers don’t need to involve the police):

Symptoms of opium overdose:

- very slow breathing
- loss of consciousness
- tiny pupils.3

Untreated overdose can lead to brain damage and death.

Long-term effects

Regular use of opium may cause:

- tolerance - needing to use more to get the same effect
- irregular periods and difficulty having children
- loss of sex drive
- constipation
- dependence on opium.3, 4

Mixing opium and other drugs

Taking multiple depressant drugs, like opium with alcohol or benzodiazepines, can significantly increase the chances of overdose.

Taking opium with stimulants, like cocaine or speed, send opposite signals to your body, which can strain the heart. Mixing opium and stimulants may also mask the effects of each other, which can increase the risk of overdose.

Withdrawal

Giving up opium after using it for a long time is challenging because the body must get used to functioning without it. Withdrawing from opium is similar to withdrawing from other opioid drugs.

Withdrawal symptoms usually start six to 24 hours after the last dose and can last around seven to ten days. These symptoms are described as flu-like, and can include:

- restlessness and irritability
- insomnia
- depression and crying
- diarrhoea
- sweating
- restless sleep
- muscle cramps
- nausea and vomiting
- fast heartbeat.6
Opium and lead poisoning

- Some opium has been found to be contaminated with lead. The source of lead in opium is still unclear, possibly due to contamination from equipment used to process the opium, intentional adulteration of opium with lead to increase its weight, or from growing opium poppies in contaminated soil.7, 8
- Lead poisoning can have a serious effect on people’s health, including organ damage.9

Opium and the law

Opium is illegal in Australia. Federal and state laws provide penalties for possessing, using, cultivating or selling opium, or driving under its influence.
Other help, support services and resources

Links to further help and support • adf.org.au/help-support/

● Further information

DrugInfo • 1300 85 85 84
Free confidential information and advice about alcohol and other drugs (9am - 5pm, Mon-Fri)

Family Drug Help • 1300 660 068 • www.familydrughelp.com.au (Victorian-based)
Services are available to support those around you who may be affected by your drug use. As well as providing understanding, they can provide information about how best to help during treatment.

Family Drug Support • 1300 368 186 • www.fds.org.au (Australia-wide)

Always call an ambulance on triple zero (000) if an overdose is suspected: tell the paramedic exactly what has been taken. Paramedics are there to help and will not involve the police unless there is a danger to themselves or others.

References


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