

# Heroin●

## What is heroin?

Heroin is part of a group of drugs known as opioids. Opioids interact with opioid receptors in the brain and elicit a range of responses within the body; from feelings of pain relief, to relaxation, pleasure and contentment.<sup>1</sup>

Heroin comes in different forms, including:

- fine white powder
- coarse off-white granules
- tiny pieces of light brown ‘rock’.<sup>1</sup>

### Other names

Smack, gear, hammer, the dragon, H, dope, junk, harry, horse, black tar, white dynamite, homebake, china white, Chinese H, poison, Dr Harry<sup>1</sup>

### How is it used?

Heroin is usually injected into a vein, but it’s also smoked (‘chasing the dragon’), and added to cigarettes and cannabis. The effects are usually felt straight away. The effects take around 10 to 15 minutes if snorted.<sup>2</sup>

## Effects of heroin

**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.

Heroin affects everyone differently, based on:

- the person’s size, weight and health
- whether the person is used to taking it
- whether other drugs are taken around the same time
- the amount taken
- the strength of the drug (it varies from batch to batch).

You will experience the below effects, which will last for 3 to 5 hours:

- intense pleasure and pain relief
- relaxation, drowsiness and clumsiness
- confusion
- slurred and slow speech
- slow breathing and heartbeat
- dry mouth
- tiny pupils
- reduced appetite and vomiting
- decreased sex drive.<sup>1,2</sup>

If injecting drugs there is an increased risk of:

- tetanus
- infection
- vein damage.

If sharing needles there is an increased risk of:

- hepatitis B
- hepatitis C
- HIV and AIDS.

## Overdose

If you take a large amount or have a strong batch, you could overdose. If you or someone you know have any of the symptoms below, call an ambulance straight away by dialling triple zero (000). Ambulance officers don’t need to involve the police.

- trouble concentrating
- falling asleep (‘going on the nod’)
- wanting to urinate but finding it hard to
- itchiness
- irregular heartbeat
- cold, clammy skin
- slow breathing, blue lips and fingertips
- passing out
- death.<sup>1,2</sup>

Naloxone (also known as Narcan®) reverses the effects of heroin, particularly in the case of an overdose.

Find out more about overdose at [adf.org.au/insights/overdose](http://adf.org.au/insights/overdose)

### Coming down

In the days after heroin use, the following may be experienced:

- irritability
- depression.<sup>1,2</sup>

### Long-term effects

Regular use of heroin may eventually cause:

- intense sadness
- irregular periods and difficulty having children
- no sex drive
- constipation
- damaged heart, lungs, liver and brain
- vein damage and skin, heart and lung infections from injecting
- needing to use more to get the same effect
- dependence on heroin
- financial, work or social problems.<sup>1,2</sup>

### Using heroin with other drugs

The effects of taking heroin with other drugs – including over-the-counter or prescribed medications – can be unpredictable and dangerous, and could cause:

- **Heroin + ice, speed or ecstasy:** enormous strain on the heart and kidneys, and increased risk of overdose.<sup>3</sup>
- **Heroin + alcohol, cannabis or benzodiazepines:** breathing may slow and eventually stop.<sup>3</sup>

## Withdrawal

Giving up heroin after using it for a long time is challenging because the body has to get used to functioning without it. Withdrawal symptoms usually start within 6 to 24 hours after the last dose and can last for about a week – days 1 to 3 will be the worst. These symptoms can include:

- cravings for heroin
- restlessness and irritability
- depression and crying
- diarrhoea
- restless sleep and yawning
- stomach and leg cramps

- vomiting and no appetite
- goosebumps
- runny nose
- fast heartbeat.<sup>1,2</sup>

Find out more about withdrawal at [adf.org.au/alcohol-drug-use/supporting-a-loved-one/withdrawal/](http://adf.org.au/alcohol-drug-use/supporting-a-loved-one/withdrawal/)

## Getting help

If your use of heroin is affecting your health, family, relationships, work, school, financial or other life situations, you can find help and support.

There are many avenues for treatment of heroin dependence, including methadone, naltrexone, and buprenorphine.

Help and support services directory: [adf.org.au/help-support/support-services-directory/](http://adf.org.au/help-support/support-services-directory/)

Information about treatment: [adf.org.au/alcohol-drug-use/supporting-a-loved-one/treatment/](http://adf.org.au/alcohol-drug-use/supporting-a-loved-one/treatment/)

### Heroin and the law

Federal and state laws provide penalties for possessing, using, making or selling heroin, or driving under the influence.

### Heroin statistics

#### National

- 1.3% of Australians aged 14 years and older have used heroin one or more times in their life.<sup>4</sup>
- 0.2% of Australians aged 14 years and older have used heroin in the previous 12 months.<sup>4</sup>

#### Young people

- 1.5 % of 12-17 have used opiates such as heroin<sup>5</sup>
- Young Australians (aged 14–29) first try heroin at 17 years on average.<sup>4</sup>

References

1. Campbell, A. (2000). The Australian illicit drug guide. Melbourne: Black Inc.
2. Brands, B., Sproule, B., & Marshman, J. (Eds.). (1998). Drugs & drug abuse (3rd ed.). Ontario: Addiction Research Foundation.
3. Goldsmith, R., Weisz, M. & Shapiro, H. (2010). The Essential Guide to Drugs and Alcohol. (14th ed.). London: DrugScope.
4. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. (2017). National Drug Strategy Household Survey detailed report 2016. Canberra: AIHW.
5. White, V., & Williams, T. (2016). Australian secondary school students' use of tobacco, alcohol, and over-the-counter and illicit substances in 2014. Melbourne: The Cancer Council, Victoria.

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.

**Other help, support services and resources**

Links to further help and support • [adf.org.au/help-support/](http://adf.org.au/help-support/)

Information on medically supervised injecting centres • [adf.org.au/medically-supervised-injecting-centres/](http://adf.org.au/medically-supervised-injecting-centres/)

● **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](http://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](http://www.fds.org.au)** (Australia-wide)



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ABN 66 057 731

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