



HEROIN

frequently asked questions

HEROIN

BROWN, SMACK, H, SCAG



So just what is this stuff my friends keep offering me?

Heroin. Chemical name, diamorphine hydrochloride. A semi-synthetic drug that is a product of the opium poppy. Common slang names include: brown, smack, H, scag. In America, they often call it dope or D. In Australia, it's known as hammer.

What are the effects like?

They vary from person to person, depending upon how often someone has used the drug. Someone using it for the first time will usually find that heroin makes them sleepy, itchy and they tend to throw up a lot. People who have used other drugs tend to wonder what the big deal is the first time they try it. If they stick with it though, chances are they will find out precisely what the big deal is. Regular users say it produces an intense sense of well-being, of detachment from the world and its worries. A common description is that it's like being wrapped up in cotton wool.

Heroin is a strong painkiller. It kills physical pain, and emotional pain. The people who tend to like heroin the best the very first time they try it are almost always those people who are suffering some sort of pain. Such people say things like 'It was like coming home for the first time.' If you have this sort of response to heroin, you should regard it as a pretty good sign that you are at a high risk of addiction.

Can't any drug be addictive?

Not really. Almost all drugs can be habit forming to varying degrees. This is sometimes known as 'psychological dependence', which is basically a desire to carry on doing something you feel you get a benefit from.

Some drugs like heroin are also physically addictive. This means that if you use the drug for a period of time you become physically ill if you try and stop.

If you take heroin for more than a few days in a row, your body makes adjustments to keep everything working normally despite the effects of the drug.

When you stop taking heroin, the body carries on as if it's still there and this causes unpleasant withdrawal symptoms – anxiety, vomiting, aches and pains.

The withdrawal symptoms are the physical addiction, and the wanting to feel the effects of the drug is the psychological dependence.

Because the effects are desirable, and the physical withdrawal symptoms are horrible, heroin has a higher risk of addiction than almost any other drug.

Does everyone who uses heroin get addicted ?

No, it's true some people do manage to use heroin recreationally. However, attempting to do so is a risky business.

Some people who try heroin don't get addicted. Why not? Probably because they don't like it very much. They might take it once or twice because it is about and their friends are all doing it, but they never care enough to seek it out for themselves. If you do like heroin, your chances of getting addicted rise with each subsequent use. Another group are those who have tried heroin and quite liked it, but for whatever reason, have only used it a few times. Part of this group might have used for several years, but only use heroin on special occasions, say once or twice a year. Such people do exist, but there really aren't very many of them. They tend to be people with very strong reasons to avoid developing a problem, and are very cautious about their use of the drug. Despite this, some of these people will still go on to experience problems at a later date, perhaps when their circumstances change, and they're not feeling very strong.

Unfortunately, the truth is that the vast majority of people who use heroin regularly for any significant period end up experiencing some sort of problem.

So is there any way of knowing which group I'll fall into?

Not until it's too late. Most addicts were well aware of the potential risks, but go ahead anyway believing that they can avoid them. If you find your use getting more frequent, especially if you start using two or more days in a row, it's a sign of where things are heading.

Well, what's so bad about addiction?

They don't talk about having a monkey on your back for no reason. If you are addicted to heroin (or any other drug for that matter), your need for the drug becomes a primary motivator in your life. You can't begin to function until you have had that day's start-up dose. Holding a job becomes difficult because you can't guarantee a steady supply. You find yourself slipping out for an hour to meet your dealer, an hour turns into two because, 'the first thing you learn is that you have always got to wait'. You start missing days because you are too sick to turn in. Sooner or later, you're out of a job. So now you're unemployed, but have still got a habit to feed. Although the real cost of heroin has dropped over the last twenty years, it still isn't cheap enough to maintain a habit on benefits. Most people in this situation fund their use in a variety of ways, most of which are illegal. So, you turn to dealing. Or shoplifting. Or prostitution.

Eventually, you get caught. So now it's even more difficult to get a job and the reasons for not being addicted are even fewer.

Are you starting to get the picture?

But that doesn't happen to everyone, does it?

No, not everyone. Just almost everyone. If you know any recreational heroin users, I can guarantee they have either not been using for very long, or if they have been using more than a year, that they impose extremely strict limits on their use, and never vary those limits. I also bet you don't know many people who fall into the second category.

How long does it take to actually get addicted then?

What? Are you still here? Persistent, aren't you? My dealer loves this kind of persistent curiosity. He says it keeps him driving a new Mercedes each year. There is no answer to your question though. How long is a piece of string? Some people fall in love on the first taste and never look back. I used on a regular basis for five years, when I had runs of several weeks of daily use, and then runs of several weeks clean before I got a real habit.

So just because someone has been using occasionally for a long time – years even – it doesn't mean they can be sure it'll never get out of control.

OK, so it's easy to get addicted. But it's easy to quit as well, isn't it? I've heard doctors on telly saying withdrawal is no worse than flu or a cold.

I will bet you anything you like that none of those doctors have ever been addicted themselves. While some of the symptoms are very like flu, there are major differences. The most important difference is that you can sleep when you have a cold. When withdrawing from heroin, you are awake throughout the whole period, hypersensitive to every nuance of your suffering. While all the time, you know how you can fix it, just by picking up the telephone.

**So how bad can it be?
And how long does it last?**

Again, people's responses to withdrawal differ. Some people find them intolerable. Others, find them unpleasant, but not completely intolerable. I've yet to meet anyone who thinks it comparable to a cold though.

As for how long it lasts, somewhere between a week and a month. You will hear some people say you that you can get over it in three days. In my view, these people are not really addicted yet.

If you have a proper physical addiction, then the most intense withdrawals should start to subside after about a week, but others, like insomnia can last a month or more. In all probability, it will be some time before you feel anything resembling normal again.

Getting through the withdrawal is the easiest part of breaking an addiction, the hard part is readjusting to life without the drug, which can take years. Years that are shadowed by periods of depression, and craving for the drug. Heroin, like any addiction, remaps an individual's brain chemistry. Pleasure becomes associated with the drug, and people often find it difficult to experience pleasure for a long time after they have given up.

But I've known people who used for a couple of months, and then just quit, cold turkey, with no major problems.

Yet, how do you know they've quit for good? The pattern you describe is quite typical for most long-term addicts, early in their careers, it does not mean that they have stopped for ever. The chances are that because it's pretty easy the first time, they get lulled into a false sense of security that makes them believe it is always going to be that easy. It isn't.

Heroin addiction is, as the doctors say, 'a chronic and relapsing condition'. Chronic, because it usually lasts a long time. The average duration of a heroin addiction is around fourteen years! Relapsing, because it's very rare for anyone to get clean and stay clean the first time they make the attempt. Those fourteen years are likely to consist of a merry-go-round of arrest, imprisonment and release, detox and relapse, over and over again until you eventually get clean or die.

What do you mean, die? I've heard heroin was a relatively safe drug?

Note that word 'relatively'. In fact, heroin is relatively safe as long as it's not injected. Amongst people who inject heroin there is a very high death rate. Not being addicted yet does not offer you protection. Experimental users are vulnerable to the risk of overdose.

Put simply, it's not so much the drug, it's the lifestyle. Used properly as a medical treatment, heroin is very safe. However, injecting heroin users are taking unknown quantities of the drug, using non-sterile equipment and both of these are high risk activities. Medical problems associated with heroin addiction include: HIV/AIDS, Hepatitis B and C, abscesses, endocarditis and septicemia. All of these are serious, life-threatening conditions.

But that's all just a function of prohibition. If we could have clean, legal heroin, then we wouldn't run any of those risks.

I'm afraid that's another myth. If you look at the research conducted on heroin addicts who were receiving legal heroin from British clinics in the late sixties and early seventies, you would notice that they die at roughly the same rates as the people who buy street heroin. The drug itself isn't the problem so much as the lifestyle and the lifestyle is primarily shaped by the condition of being addicted to heroin.

Research in Switzerland that provides legal heroin to a group of the most severe long-term heroin addicts does show some improvements in health, criminal activity and work, but these people are a long way into their drug using careers, and the program also provides a great deal of intensively structured social care, and not just free pharmaceutical heroin.

If we know anything at all about heroin and addiction, we know this; there are no easy answers or simple solutions, and anyone who tells you otherwise is a liar or a fool. And if you remember this one fact, then you'll know more about the subject than most of the self-appointed experts out there.

Well, that's all very well and good, but how am I supposed to remember all this stuff you've told me?

You don't have to remember everything. Just bear in mind these key issues:

- **Heroin is a risky drug, with serious negative consequences.**
- **The only way to be sure of avoiding addiction is not to use it in the first place.**
- **If you have been messing about with it, you'd be well advised to stop as soon as possible. The longer you leave it, the harder it becomes. If you cannot do it alone, you can get help.**
- **If you are going to continue to use, avoid injecting, which puts you at risk of other serious health problems, and avoid using it in combination with other drugs, which heightens the risk of overdose.**
- **If you can't remember these key issues, I'll see you down at the methadone clinic in a year or two.**
- **Err, that's it...**

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[>] aims
To provide information on the nature and effects of heroin in a question and answer format. This publication is designed to make people think before embarking on 'casual' or experimental heroin use by highlighting the nature and risks of addiction.

[>] audience
Adults and young people engaged in recreational drug use. Use with under 16s with support.

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