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Heroin Use on the Rise

Heroin is an illegal drug that is very habit forming. It doesn't occur in nature but is made from morphine. Morphine comes from poppy plants and is used to treat pain. Doctors first used heroin as a substitute for morphine. When they learned how habit forming it is, they stopped using it. Now it's only used illegally to get a rush or as an escape from life. Heroin is typically sold on the street as a white or brownish powder that is "cut" with sugars or other powdered substances. Pure heroin is a white powder. The form known as "black tar" is less pure. It may be sticky like tar or hard like coal. Its color, varying from dark brown to black, comes from impurities.

Heroin use is on the rise. It increased 80% from 2007 to 2013.¹

Prescription drug abuse may be "gateway" to heroin use

The increase in heroin use may be related to the rise in use and abuse of opioid pain medicines. Nearly half of young people who use heroin said they had abused opioids before starting to use heroin.² Some switch to heroin because it's cheaper and easier to get. This is in stark contrast to the 1960s when more than 80% of heroin users started with heroin.³

Another reason for the increase in heroin use may be the availability of highly pure heroin. Any form of heroin can be injected. Highly pure heroin, however, allows users to more easily snort or smoke the drug and still achieve a sustained 'high'. Smoking or snorting the drug may be more appealing to users than injecting it.

Why is increasing heroin use of such concern?

It's of concern because of the ways it can hurt the user. Use can lead to:

- Sores at the site of injection
- Blood poisoning
- Serious infections like HIV or hepatitis
- Damage to organs like the liver, kidney, and lungs

About a fourth of users become addicted.⁴ Addiction increases all the risks. This includes the risk of overdose and death.

Pregnant women who use might suffer a miscarriage. Those who carry the fetus to term have a much higher rate of low birth-weight babies. Babies are born addicted. They go through withdrawal after birth. When women are treated for their addiction while they are pregnant, the baby often has less severe withdrawal symptoms. Buprenorphine is used for this.



Heroin Facts

Did you know:

- Tolerance develops with repeated use, requiring ever larger doses to cause a high.
- Repeated use changes the structure of the brain.⁵
- Heroin causes severe slowing of breathing, sometimes leading to coma, brain damage, or death.
- Withdrawal symptoms may start a few hours after the last dose.
- The chance of surviving an overdose depends on how quickly medical help is obtained.
- Injection carries a greater risk of overdose than either snorting or smoking.
- Each injection drug user infected with hepatitis C is likely to infect 20 other people.⁶
- Impurities in street heroin can cause organ damage when injected.

Heroin Use on the Rise

Facts

Deaths from heroin overdose are on the rise

Heroin users usually don't know the actual strength or content of the drug they're taking. This puts them at risk for overdose and/or death. So the death rate has increased along with the rise in heroin use. Deaths from heroin overdose doubled from 2010 to 2012, according to a recent study.³ These data show that death rates increased significantly for:

- Men and women
- All age groups
- All regions of the country
- All racial/ethnic groups except Native Americans

How to tell if someone is using heroin

With heroin use and deaths on the rise, it's good to recognize the tell-tale signs. Here are some general signs that someone may be using heroin:

- Sleepiness, suddenly nodding off
- Severe itching
- Runny nose
- Flushing
- Slurred speech
- Shortness of breath
- Nausea, vomiting
- Dry mouth

More specific signs of heroin use include drug supplies such as:

- Syringes or needles not used for medical purposes
- Burned silver spoons
- Foil with burn marks
- Straws with burn marks
- Small plastic bags with white powdery residue
- Water pipes or other pipes

References

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