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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. 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 rise in heroin use may be linked to the rise in use and abuse of pain medicines. Nearly half of young people who use heroin said they abused pain medicines first.² Some switch to heroin because it's cheaper and easier to get. This is in stark contrast to the 1960s. Back then more than 80% of heroin users started with heroin.³

Why is increasing heroin use of such concern?

Heroin use is dangerous. It can lead to sores at the site of injection. This can lead, in turn, to blood poisoning. Injection can also lead to serious infections like HIV or hepatitis. Heroin use can damage organs like the liver, kidney, and lungs. Almost a fourth of users become dependent on the drug.⁴ This increases all the risks, including the risk of overdose and death.

Women who use heroin during pregnancy might lose their baby. Those who don't tend to have small babies who are born addicted to heroin. These babies have to be weaned off the drug or they will go through withdrawal. Sometimes women are treated for heroin addiction while pregnant. This can reduce withdrawal symptoms in the baby. But the baby is often still affected.⁷

Deaths from heroin overdose are on the rise

Heroin users usually don't know how strong their drug is. They also don't know exactly what is in it. This means they are at risk for overdose or death. So the death rate has increased along with the rise in heroin use. Deaths due to overdose have doubled in recent years.³ Death rates have increased significantly for:



Rise in use and misuse of opioid pain medicines

The use of prescription opioid pain medicines is on the rise. So is their misuse. Both increased 4-fold from 1999 to 2010.⁵ But deaths in women increased 1.5 times more than those in men.⁶ Overdose of prescription opioids in women is a serious problem. Compared to men, women:

- Are more likely to have chronic pain
- Are likely to be given higher doses of pain medicines
- Are likely to use them for longer periods
- May become dependent on them faster
- Are more likely to get them from more than one doctor

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- 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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