

# HEROIN

## THE FACTS



[www.drugaware.com.au](http://www.drugaware.com.au)

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## **THE LAW**

In Western Australia, it is illegal to use, possess, manufacture or supply heroin. Penalties range from a \$2,000 fine and/or two years in prison, to a \$100,000 fine and/or imprisonment for 25 years. In addition, any person convicted of a drug offence will receive a criminal record. This can lead to difficulties in getting a job, credit or visas for overseas travel.

## **WHAT IS HEROIN?**

Heroin is a depressant drug, which means it suppresses the activity of the central nervous system. Depressants affect the central nervous system by slowing down the activity of certain chemicals in the brain. This slows down the whole body, including breathing and heart rate.

## **WHERE DOES HEROIN COME FROM?**

Heroin belongs to a group of drugs called narcotic analgesics or opioids. These drugs are very strong pain relievers. Opioids are derived from a substance produced by the opium poppy which, when dried is known as opium. Heroin is manufactured from morphine or codeine, which are chemicals in the juice of the opium poppy head. Heroin is a stronger and more addictive drug than morphine or codeine.

People have used opium for several thousand years in a variety of cultures. Heroin was first synthesised in 1898 in a London hospital to treat morphine addiction.

The opium poppy grows in many parts of the world. In Australia, crops are grown legally in Tasmania for medical purposes. Most of the illegal heroin in Australia comes from Asia and the Middle East.

## HOW IS HEROIN USED?

Heroin is usually injected, but can also be smoked or snorted. The effects of heroin usually last from two to four hours.

## HOW MANY PEOPLE USE HEROIN?

The 2004 National Drug Strategy Household Survey reported that 2% of Western Australians aged 14 years and over reported that they had ever used heroin. Lifetime use of heroin was highest among 20- to 29-year-olds (3%). Less than one percent (0.2%) of Western Australians aged 14 years and over had used heroin in the last 12 months. In the last 12 months heroin use was greatest among 20- to 29-year-olds (0.7%).

## HEALTH EFFECTS OF USING HEROIN

The effects of heroin will vary from person to person depending on the characteristics of the:

- **Individual (user)** – Mood, physical size, health, gender, previous experience with heroin, expectations of the drug, personality, whether the person has had food and whether other drugs have been taken.
- **Drug** – The amount used, its purity, and whether it is injected, smoked or snorted.
- **Setting (environment)** – Whether the person is using with friends, on his/her own, in a social setting or at home, at work or before driving.

<b>SHORT-TERM EFFECTS</b>	<b>SHORT TERM EFFECTS OF HIGHER DOSES</b>	<b>LONG-TERM EFFECTS</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• pain relief</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• breathing becomes even more depressed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• dependence</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• shallow breathing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• pupils narrow to pinpoints</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• loss of appetite</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• nausea and vomiting</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• skin is cold to touch</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• chronic constipation</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• constipation</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the central nervous system can be depressed to the point where heart rate and breathing stop and possibly lead to death</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• heart, chest and bronchial problems</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• feeling of wellbeing</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• women often experience irregular menstruation and are susceptible to infertility</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• sleepiness</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• men can experience impotence</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• loss of balance</li> </ul>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• reduced coordination</li> </ul>		

There are also dangerous effects associated with the method of use. Injecting heroin can result in blocked blood vessels that can cause major damage to the body's organs, inflamed blood vessels and abscesses, blood poisoning, bacterial infections which may damage the heart valves, vein collapse, infection at injection site, bruising or more serious injuries if users inject into an artery or tissue. Snorting can damage the fragile mucous membrane in the nasal passages. It produces burns and sores on the membranes that line the interior of the nose.

## **HEROIN AND OTHER DRUGS**

Using more than one drug at a time can have unpredictable and dangerous effects. Mixing heroin with other drugs increases the risk of harm. For example, mixing heroin with alcohol, benzodiazepines, or other depressants can be fatal as it increases the risk of heart failure.

## **RELATIONSHIPS**

Drug-use can lead to emotional problems and affect relationships with family and friends. When people are under the influence of drugs, changes can occur in their behaviour depending on how they feel (for example, sleepy, euphoric or sick). Friends may not be able to rely on the person as the user's moods can change depending whether they are using or not. Long-term use can lead to serious health and financial problems, which can also affect relationships.

## TOLERANCE, DEPENDENCE AND WITHDRAWAL

Tolerance and dependence develop very quickly with heroin because of the short acting nature of the drug.

- **Tolerance** - This means that a person needs more of the drug to achieve the same effects they felt previously with smaller amounts.
- **Dependence** - This means that the drug becomes central to a user's life.
- **Withdrawal** - stopping or cutting down heroin use can be difficult. The severity of withdrawal symptoms and how long they will last vary from person to person. People cope better with heroin withdrawal if they understand what is going to happen. Withdrawal symptoms usually peak between the two and four days following last use. However, minor symptoms such as sleep difficulties can last for another two to three weeks. Some common heroin withdrawal symptoms include runny eyes and nose, sneezing, yawning, sweating, feeling agitated and irritable, goosebumps, hot and cold flushes, strong urges to use heroin, stomach cramps, diarrhoea, poor appetite, nausea, vomiting, back pain, pain in legs or arms, headache, poor sleep and poor concentration.

While a person may have withdrawn from the body's physical dependence on heroin there are a number of other psychological factors that may lead to an increased risk of using heroin again. Before commencing withdrawal from heroin it is important to plan ahead, work out prior to withdrawal how to deal with difficult situations that may lead to using heroin again.

When planning to withdraw from heroin use it is important to consider how to deal with:

- physical withdrawal symptoms
- commitment to changing behaviour

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- high risk situation (such as cravings)
  - a relapse (such as exploring the original reasons for stopping heroin use and looking at the pros and cons of returning to heroin use. Counselling can be very useful in exploring relapse issues)
  - the time you once devoted to heroin (develop new interests and friends that are enjoyable and rewarding).

For more information or assistance with heroin withdrawal phone the Alcohol and Drug Information Service, contact details are outlined at the back of this booklet.

## OVERDOSE

Overdose occurs when the level of intoxication from the drug reaches a point where it begins to produce physical and/or psychological harm. Overdose from heroin occurs as a result of the depressant properties of the drug. Heroin can slow a person's heart rate and breathing rate. In some cases, a person may experience heart failure and respiratory failure, which may lead to coma and death.

The risk of overdose generally increases with a larger dose. As the strength and content of street heroin is unknown it can be difficult to judge the dose, increasing the risk of overdose.

## HEROIN AND PREGNANCY

Using heroin while pregnant can harm an unborn child. Babies born to women using heroin are usually underdeveloped and suffer from breathing problems and infections in the first few weeks of life. Heroin can also cause premature labour, babies may be born so early that they need intensive care. The baby's poor health can also be associated with the poor health and nutrition of their mothers.



In Western Australia, it is against the law for anyone to drive under the influence of drugs, including heroin. The Road Traffic Act 1974 Section 63 states that 'a person who drives or attempts to drive a motor vehicle while under the influence of alcohol, drugs, or alcohol and drugs to such an extent as to be incapable of having proper control of the vehicle commits an offence, and the offender may be arrested without warrant'. Breaking this law carries penalties including disqualification from driving, fines and/or imprisonment. A person convicted of an offence under the Road Traffic Act 1974 is liable for the following:

### **First Offence**

- a fine ranging from \$400 to \$2,500
- disqualification from holding or obtaining a driver's licence for up to six months.

### **Second Offence**

- a fine ranging from \$800 to \$3,500 or imprisonment for six months
- disqualification from holding or obtaining a driver's licence for up to two years.

### **Third or Subsequent Offence**

- a fine ranging from \$800 to \$5,000 or imprisonment for 18 months
- permanent disqualification from holding or obtaining a driver's licence.

## TAKING CARE

It is safer not to use heroin. However, if you or someone you know uses heroin, remember the following:

- Using heroin can have harmful effects, users can find themselves in dangerous situations. Therefore, they should not be left alone.
- If you suspect any bad effects, call an ambulance immediately. Don't delay, you could save a life. The ambulance officers are there to help you. Be sure to describe what drug the person has taken. If the person is unconscious and you know first aid, place them in the recovery position and ensure the airway is clear. If they have stopped breathing, provide Expired Air Resuscitation (EAR). The police are not required to attend unless a death has occurred or the ambulance officers are threatened.
- Avoid mixing heroin with alcohol or other drugs.
- It is safer not to inject drugs. However, if you or someone you know does inject, they should always inject into safe areas of the body, use clean equipment (needle, syringe, swab, tourniquet, spoon, glass, filter and sterile water) and not share gear. Fitpacks® which contain clean syringes are available from:
  - most pharmacies
  - needle and syringe exchange programs. (For information on opening times and locations of these programs phone the Alcohol and Drug Information Service, contact details are outlined at the back of this booklet)
  - some regional hospitals, health centres and nursing posts.

## TREATMENT PATHWAYS

There are a variety of treatment pathways available for people with heroin-related problems. The drug(s) used and the availability of services as well as the user's health, desired outcome, support network and unique circumstances need to be taken into consideration. Deciding on the best treatment pathway or combination of pathways is best done in consultation with a drug and alcohol counsellor.

## MORE INFORMATION

For up-to-date information about heroin or other drugs call the Alcohol and Drug Information Service or Parent Drug Information Service, or visit [www.drugaware.com.au](http://www.drugaware.com.au)

### Alcohol and Drug Information Service

- Access information about drugs confidentially and quickly.
- Talk to a professionally trained counsellor about alcohol or other drugs.
- Find out about other services.

(08) 9442 5000

1800 198 024 toll free country callers

## **Parent Drug Information Service**

- Drug information and support for parents and family members.
- Talk to a professionally trained counsellor about alcohol and other drugs.
- Talk confidentially to another parent for strategies and support.
- Find out where to go for further help.

(08) 9442 5050

1800 653 203 toll free country callers

## **[www.drugaware.com.au](http://www.drugaware.com.au)**

- Access detailed information about drugs.
- Find out about the latest issues.
- Post questions and have them answered anonymously by health professionals.
- Find links to other useful sites.

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Changes in circumstances after the date of publication of this brochure inevitably will result in this brochure becoming outdated in some respects. It is the responsibility of readers of this brochure to keep themselves updated with any changes or developments.



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**For information on heroin, visit [www.drugaware.com.au](http://www.drugaware.com.au)  
or for confidential advice and counselling call the Alcohol and  
Drug Information Service 24 hour helpline  
on 9442 5000 or 1800 198 024 (country callers).**