

# fast facts

## heroin

■ **Overview:** If drugs were boxers, heroin would be the undisputed heavyweight champion of the world. A powerful narcotic derived from the opium poppy, heroin erases pain and wraps users in a blissful blanket of oblivion—



and if you don't have any pain, it will erase whatever you *do* have. Related drugs include the narcotics morphine and codeine, and the synthetic painkillers Dilaudid<sup>®</sup>, Demerol<sup>®</sup>, Percodan<sup>®</sup>, and OxyContin<sup>®</sup>.

■ **Street Names:** Junk, skag, dope, smack, horse. Often sold on the street under such “brand names” as “body bag” and “homicide.”

■ **Appearance:** Brown or white powder, or a black, sticky resin or tar.

■ **Actions/Effects:** Heroin plugs into receptor cells in the brain that regulate the perception of pain and the experience of pleasure. At low doses, it triggers a dreamlike state of intoxication with such un-dreamy side effects as constricted pupils, reduced appetite, constipation, low body temperature, itching, sweating, and stupor. At higher doses, these effects increase, but breathing, heart rate, and blood pressure are reduced. At very high doses, death results.



■ **Medical Uses:** None in the United States, but heroin is used to treat severe pain in Great Britain and other countries.

■ **Risks/Side Effects:** Although heroin can be sniffed, more often it's injected or smoked. Needle use carries the most risks: Hazards include bacterial and HIV infection, collapsed veins, and hepatitis. Other dangers:

▶ **Overdose:** Heroin purity is uncertain, which increases the risk of accidental overdose. Symptoms include slow, irregular breathing; pinpoint pupils; and coma.

▶ **Addiction:** Heroin is very addictive. Withdrawal symptoms include extreme physical discomfort (with flu-like physical sickness and pain), tremors, anxiety, and intense craving.



■ **Trends:** Over the years, heroin users have tended to be urban and poor—easily overlooked and quickly forgotten. But increased



potency in recent years and the spotlight of pop culture (focused on the public personal dramas of such stars as Kurt Cobain and Robert Downey, Jr. and such movies as “Pulp Fiction” and “Trainspotting”), have inspired a new generation of young, middle-class users.

■ **Demographics:** Numerically, heroin isn't a huge problem—unless, of course, it happens to affect you, which can make it *seem* huge. According to a 2009 survey, more than 3.7 million Americans have tried heroin, with 399,000 reporting use during the previous 12 months. During that same year, heroin figured into 213,118 U.S. emergency-room admissions.



This is one in a series of fact sheets on drugs and health published by Do It Now Foundation. Please call for a complete list of titles—or visit our web site at [www.doitnow.org](http://www.doitnow.org).



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