

## Heroin- : Basics

Other names: *Brown*, *smack*, *skag*,

- Heroin and other opiates/opioids depress the nervous system, slowing down body functions such as breathing and heart rate. They are also pain-killing drugs.
- Heroin is derived from opium poppies
- Most illicit heroin comes in a powder form. Pure heroin is a white powder, which is rarely sold on the streets. Most illicit heroin in the UK is impure, and comes as a brown powder. Street heroin varies widely in purity, from 1 to 98%, with a national average of around 40%.
- Heroin may be smoked, injected, or snorted. It is usually smoked on silver foil, and the fumes are smoked using a home-made 'tube'. When injecting, heroin is combined with water and an acid such as citric or ascorbic acid. The mixture is then heated and dissolved.

### The effects:

- Heroin usually produces a feeling of warmth, calmness and well-being. The effects of heroin can come on quickly and last several hours, though this will depend on how much is used and the method of use. In first-time users, heroin may cause nausea or vomiting.
- It acts as a painkiller, both physically and emotionally.
- In high doses, heroin has a strong sedative effect and may cause extreme drowsiness, a state commonly known as 'gouching'.



### Risks

- With regular use, a tolerance can develop. This means that more of the drug is needed to get the same effect. The euphoric effect of heroin tends to decrease as tolerance increases.
- Overdose is possible when using any of these methods, with injecting being the most dangerous. Mixing heroin with other sedative drugs, such as, methadone, alcohol or benzodiazepines increases the risk of overdose.
- Injecting: Sharing any injecting equipment such as spoons, filters, tourniquets or syringes carries a significant risk of contracting a blood-borne virus such as Hepatitis or H.I.V.

- Need more advice

[www.drugscope.co.uk](http://www.drugscope.co.uk)

[www.talktofrank.com](http://www.talktofrank.com)

- Legal status

Please refer to <http://www.release.org.uk> where information is kept up-to-date

## Heroin: More Information

### Side effects and risks

- user will experience withdrawal symptoms within about 24 hours of stopping, often starting between 6-8 hours of the last dose. Such symptoms include vomiting, diarrhoea, aches and pains, sweats, stomach cramps, muscle spasms in the legs, severe anxiety and depression. Symptoms may also include hallucinations, agitation and insomnia. The severity of the withdrawal symptoms will be influenced by factors such as the amount used and the frequency of use. Symptoms tend to peak within 2-3 days and fade after about a week, though the general feeling of being unwell may last for a number of weeks.
- **Injecting:** as with all drugs, there are potentially serious risks associated with injecting heroin. In addition to increasing the risk of overdose, injecting may cause vein damage, resulting in blockage or collapse of veins. Other risks include abscesses, ulcers, phlebitis, cellulitis, septicaemia, thrombosis, including deep vein thrombosis, gangrene and endocarditis. Sharing any injecting equipment such as spoons, filters, tourniquets or syringes carries a significant risk of contracting a blood-borne virus such as Hepatitis or H.I.V.
- **Pregnancy:** heroin use during pregnancy may result in a lower birth weight baby and withdrawal symptoms in the baby after birth, requiring medical intervention. It is vital to get medical help if you have been using heroin or other opiates at any stage in your pregnancy.



### Needle Exchange

For details of needle exchange services in the Norfolk area, go to [www.nordat.org.uk](http://www.nordat.org.uk), and click on 'Access Help' on the home page.

If you live outside the Norfolk area, you can find details of local needle exchanges at [www.talktofrank.com](http://www.talktofrank.com). Used needles and syringes should be disposed of in a sharps bin and returned to your local needle exchange service.

You can exchange needles at The Matthew Project

### Treatment

If you have been using heroin for some time, you may need medical help if you want to cut down or stop. Treatment options include detoxification and substitute prescribing. **Methadone** is the most frequently prescribed heroin substitute, and can be used for detox or maintenance.

If you live in the Norfolk area, you can call the Matthew Project helpline for advice

It is important to remember that, if you use heroin or other opiates after a period of abstinence, you will be at very high risk of overdose.



# The Matthew Project, Norfolk

■ Heroin: Basics

■ Heroin: More

■ Harm Minimisation

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## Harm Minimisation

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**Driving** is dangerous on this substance

For further information please refer to

<http://www.brake.org.uk/index.php?p=913>

[www.drugdrive.co.uk](http://www.drugdrive.co.uk)

<http://www.rta.nsw.gov.au/roadsafety/drinkdriving/drugs/index.html>