



Heroin

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“Yeah, you can snort heroin. Definitely snort heroin. That's what I do.”

– Christina, 18 years old

In Illinois, Oregon, New York, Alabama and several other states, police are reporting an increase in the number of deaths of young people from an overdose of heroin. In fact, today government surveys show that over 25 percent of high school seniors say heroin is "fairly easy to buy."

"Smack", "H", "Junk" ... they're all street names for heroin. And anecdotal evidence suggests the use of this drug may be on the rise for two reasons, experts say.

First, many kids already using prescription drugs are looking for a new and cheaper high.

"Kids are looking for something different. And this is something different. Every addict-anybody who's ever been addicted to drugs is always looking for that perfect high, the thing that will get them feeling the way that they want to feel, but they still want to convince themselves that they're in control. And so addicts are constantly looking for new drugs, new combinations, new ways to take drugs and this is just an extension of that," explains substance abuse counselor, Dr. Robert Margolis.

Second, heroin today is purer and more refined, which means it can be snorted instead of injected.

"Yeah, you can snort heroin, definitely snort heroin. That's what I do," says 18-year-old Christina.

That makes heroin more appealing to kids afraid of sticking a needle in their arm.

"It's a way for kids to rationalize doing a drug that is highly addictive and highly dangerous. Of course, it's in no way safe, it's in no way ok, but it's a way that in their minds they convince that it's safe," says Margolis.

That's exactly what Christina thought. "I won't do it because I know shooting things up is stronger and it makes it more addictive."

But, Margolis warns, it won't be long until they're looking for a stronger high. "Give them time. After a few years of snorting, they'll be shooting up. There's no doubt about it."

Heroin is an illegal, highly addictive drug. It is both the most abused and the most rapidly acting of the opiates. Heroin is processed from morphine, a naturally occurring substance extracted from the seed pod of certain varieties of poppy plants. It is typically sold as a white or brownish powder or as the black sticky substance known on the streets as "black tar heroin."

According to the National Institutes on Drug Abuse, although purer heroin is becoming more common, most street heroin is "cut" with other drugs or with substances such as sugar, starch, powdered milk, or quinine. Street heroin can also be cut with strychnine, fentanyl or other poisons. Because heroin abusers do not know the actual strength of the drug or its true contents, they are at risk of overdose or death. Heroin also poses special problems because of the transmission of HIV and other diseases that can occur from sharing needles or other injection equipment.

Tips for Parents

Heroin enters the brain, where it is converted to morphine and binds to receptors known as opioid receptors. These receptors are located in many areas of the brain (and in the body), especially those involved in the perception of pain and in reward. Opioid receptors are also located in the brain stem—important for automatic processes critical for life, such as breathing (respiration), blood pressure, and arousal. Heroin overdoses frequently involve a suppression of respiration.

After an intravenous injection of heroin, users report feeling a surge of euphoria ("rush") accompanied by dry mouth, a warm flushing of the skin, heaviness of the extremities, and clouded mental functioning. Following this initial euphoria, the user goes "on the nod," an alternately wakeful and drowsy state. Users who do not inject the drug may not experience the initial rush, but other effects are the same.

With regular heroin use, tolerance develops, in which the user's physiological (and psychological) response to the drug decreases, and more heroin is needed to achieve the same intensity of effect. Heroin users are at high risk for addiction—it is estimated that about 23 percent of individuals who use heroin become dependent on it.

References

- National Institutes on Drug Abuse