



# **Dealing with Heroin**

# Bro's & Sis's

## Dealing with heroin

Heroin can seem to take over people's lives. They keep using even when it seems like the worst thing they could do. Their behaviour can affect you in a lot of different ways. Here's a bit of information about heroin and a few tips to help you deal with your brother or sister.

What happens the moment a person uses heroin?

Heroin makes a person feel high and sedated. Your brother or sister might feel a rush of intense pleasure. Soon this is replaced by a sense of contentment and relaxation that lasts about three hours. They will also experience drowsiness and confusion. They might sit in a half-conscious state called 'nodding'.

Over time your brother or sister will probably need more of the drug to feel the same effects. This obviously means they need more and more money to support their drug use. Eventually, no amount of the drug is enough to get a real high. The

person may continue to use heroin, but mainly to delay withdrawal symptoms.

Heroin is very addictive. A heroin user will focus more and more on how to obtain the pleasure and the escape that the drug provides. This can become more important than all other aspects of their life. Heroin changes the brain to make people crave the drug. It can be very difficult to give up or cut down heroin use.

Withdrawal symptoms happen when a person stops using heroin. The symptoms are sometimes described as like having a very bad case of the flu and include:

- a craving for the drug.
- restlessness and shaking.
- cramps, muscle and bone pain.
- loss of appetite, vomiting and diarrhoea.
- tears and a runny nose.
- increased irritability.
- insomnia.
- depression.
- yawning.
- a cold sweat.

These withdrawal symptoms get stronger and usually peak around 2 to 4 days after the last heroin use. They

usually wear off after 6 to 7 days, but some symptoms, like depression, anxiety, insomnia and a continued craving for the drug, can last for months and even years. Sudden withdrawal from heroin rarely causes death.

What are signs that your brother or sister may be using heroin?

- Constricted pupils.
- Sores on the body from injecting.
- Drowsiness and an inability to concentrate or think clearly.
- Items used to administer heroin left around the place including syringes, spoons, scales, coffee grinders, small plastic bags.
- Messy, unclean or poor physical appearance.
- Changes in behaviour (see below).

What behaviours are you likely to see if someone's using heroin?

- Lying to friends and family members.
- Inability to keep commitments and long unexplained absences.
- Mood swings and strong emotions.
- Money troubles, including unpaid loans or stealing.
- Drop in work or school performance and inability to hold down a job.
- Loss of interest in all activities other

than obtaining and using heroin.

- Not caring about the consequences of their actions.
- Not seeming to take into account the injury, pain, or loss their behaviour causes others.
- Behaving in compulsive, self-destructive and irresponsible ways.

What should you tell your brother or sister to help them?  
Try a small taste first to judge the strength of the mix when buying a new quantity of heroin.  
Be very careful if they haven't been using for some time or are using in an unfamiliar place. Their body's tolerance to heroin will be lower than normal and they are more likely to overdose.  
Never use heroin alone. They should make sure there is a friend to watch them, even if the friend is also using. Heroin should not be mixed with other drugs, particularly depressants like alcohol and benzos (eg. Valium). This is a major cause of overdose. Even a stimulant like cocaine with heroin (a "speed ball") is bad news. The cocaine wears off quickly, then the central nervous system is depressed while the heroin is still active.  
Never share needles or injecting equipment and always use a clean needle for each shot.  
Make sure the equipment and space in which they are using is clean. Filters can help to remove bacteria, and lessens the risk of infections.

How to tell if your brother or sister may be overdosing.  
Signs of a heroin overdose include:

- Shallow or difficult breathing.
- Pinpoint pupils, blank eyes or eyes rolled back in the head.
- Clammy skin.

- Convulsions.
- Cannot be woken.
- Pale skin.
- Vomiting.

What to do if they are overdosing.  
Call 000. Don't delay because you think you or your brother or sister might get into trouble. Ambulance officers very rarely involve the police. Try to wake the person if they are unconscious and keep them awake. Lay them on their side and make sure that their mouth and throat is clear. Gently tilt their head back so their tongue does not block the airway. Stay with the person until the ambulance arrives. Find out if anyone at the scene knows mouth-to-mouth resuscitation or cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR), unless you know how to administer it yourself. Provide the ambulance officers with as much information as you can: how much heroin was taken, how long ago, and any pre-existing medical conditions.

Treatment options.

**Methadone.**  
A safer substitute for heroin. It helps reduce the impact that heroin has on the lives of people who are dependent, by reducing the harm associated with injecting an expensive illicit drug of unknown strength and purity.

**Buprenorphine.**  
Can help treat heroin dependence by preventing withdrawal symptoms and by blocking the effects of heroin (so using heroin will not provide the "high" that would normally be expected).

Naltrexone works by blocking the pain-killing and euphoric effects of heroin. It can help because the person is aware that they cannot achieve a "high" from using heroin.

**Ultra Rapid Opiate Detox (UROD).**  
UROD is a quick method of withdrawing or detoxifying from heroin. It involves high doses of naltrexone given over a 48-hour period or less along with heavy sedation. By the end of the process, the patient should be physically withdrawn from opiates. UROD is currently under trial in Australia.

Questions and answers.

Q. Why would your brother or sister inject heroin?

A. Injection produces more of a rush, and is more cost-effective.

Q. Isn't heroin a less dangerous drug if you snort or smoke it instead of injecting it?

A. No. Heroin is heroin. There is no safe way of ingesting it. You can still die from an overdose or become addicted by snorting or smoking it. Smoking heroin is sometimes thought to be more addictive, but using heroin in any form is always addictive.

Helpful phone numbers.

Directline/ADIS, Drug advice –1800 888 236.

Family drug helpline, Support and Advice – 1300 660 068.