

# Substances At A Glance: Heroin (Opioids)

*Heroin was first produced commercially in 1898 as a 'wonder drug' used in cold medicines and pain relievers.<sup>1</sup> However, its use is illegal in Canada due to its addictive and life-threatening properties.*



**What is heroin?** Heroin is a drug that is processed from the opioid morphine, which itself is extracted from the seed-pod of the opium poppy plant. Pure heroin is a fine white powder with a bitter taste; other heroin products may appear as a dark, sticky gum or as a brown, granular substance. It can be snorted, smoked, or injected into either a vein, a muscle or under the skin. Heroin is known to cause a rush of pleasure, followed by feelings of relaxation and satisfaction, however it is both illegal and dangerous to overall health.



**Heroin use among youth:** Past-year heroin use in Canada is reported by 1% of high school age youth<sup>2</sup> and at an even lower rate among post-secondary students (0.1%).<sup>3</sup> According to the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, most people who use heroin regularly are over age 30.<sup>4</sup>



**Why do people use heroin?** Those who report using heroin may do so to escape from stress or trauma, or to feel a strong and immediate rush of pleasure and relaxation. Heroin is an addictive substance, both stronger and cheaper than most other opioids. The American Medical Association reports that 45% of people who use heroin reported first having an addiction to prescription opioids.<sup>5</sup>



**What are the effects of heroin use?** Heroin, like other opioids, binds to receptors in the brain that respond to pain and pleasure. Heroin's effects can be felt within seconds of injecting or snorting, producing feelings of pleasure and well-being (known as euphoria) for a period of a few minutes. Afterward, a person will feel a period of calmness which lasts up to an hour; additional effects may last up to five hours. Additional effects include dizziness, confusion, falling in and out of consciousness, drowsiness and slowed breathing.<sup>6</sup>



**Heroin and the law:** Heroin is considered a Schedule I substance under the Controlled Drugs and Substances Act. In Canada, producing, possessing, selling or giving heroin to others can result in criminal charges, fines and up to 14 years in prison. Prescription heroin can only be obtained through the Urgent Public Health Needs process, which is intended to treat problematic opioid use with medical supervision.<sup>6</sup>



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Between January 2023 - March 2024, a quarter of heroin products seized by Canadian law enforcement and sent for analysis contained fentanyl, a far more potent and lethal opioid.<sup>7</sup>



**What are the risks of heroin use?** Short term risks of heroin include nausea, vomiting, slowed breathing and unconsciousness. Heroin can cause a person to stop breathing, which can be fatal. Long term heroin use can affect one's ability to feel emotions & regulate mood. It can also cause depression, suicidal thoughts and learning issues. Heroin can cause sexual problems in men, irregular menstruation in women and even cardiac arrest. Using while pregnant can cause low birth weight, premature delivery and fatal infant seizures.<sup>6</sup>



**How can someone reduce the risks of heroin use?** Do not mix heroin with any other drugs or alcohol as this can increase the risk of harm or fatality. No one should use heroin alone in case they overdose and stop breathing. There are supervised consumption or overdose prevention sites available in cities across Canada. If you know someone who is using heroin, make sure they have Naloxone on hand in case of an overdose.



**What is Naloxone?** Naloxone is a fast-acting drug available as a nasal spray or an injectable needle. It temporarily reverses the effects of an opioid overdose. It is safe for all ages and non-addictive. Naloxone's effects only last 20-90 minutes, while an opioid can remain in the body for a longer period of time. Therefore, if a person overdoses on opioids, they need medical attention even if they have taken Naloxone, as any improvements they show may only be temporary. Take-home naloxone kits are available for free at pharmacies in some provinces.<sup>8</sup>



**How can I help my kids understand the risks of opioids?** Have a discussion with your kids about the opioid crisis and ensure they understand the serious health risks of consuming any pills or powder they get off the street or online. If your child already uses opioids non-medically, it's important they know how to reduce their risk of an accidental overdose. Make a safety plan together, confirm they know the signs of overdose and how to administer Naloxone. Ensure they know that you will support them whenever they need to reach out for help.



**Heroin addiction and withdrawal:** Heroin addiction can affect a person within a matter of weeks, taking over their life. A person addicted to heroin may spend more than they can afford, falling into poverty, homelessness or breaking the law to pay for heroin. Withdrawal symptoms (insomnia, racing heartbeat, pain, nausea, anxiety, depression and hot/cold flashes) can start as soon as 6-12 hours after the last dose, peak after 1-3 days and fade away after 5-7 days. Anyone trying to quit using should seek support from their healthcare provider.<sup>6</sup>

## Reference List

1. Drug Enforcement Administration, 2021. [Heroin Bottle](#).
2. Government of Canada, 2025. [Canadian Student Alcohol And Drugs Survey, 2023-2024](#).
3. Government of Canada, 2024. [Canadian Post-Secondary Education Alcohol & Drug Use Survey 2021-2022](#).
4. Centre for Addiction & Mental Health, retrieved April 2024. [Heroin](#).
5. American Psychiatric Association, 2022. [Opioid Use Disorder](#).
6. Health Canada, 2023. [Heroin](#).
7. Government of Canada, 2024. [Drug Analysis Service and Cannabis Laboratory](#).
8. Government of Canada, 2023. [Naloxone](#).