Drugs a-to-z

Heroin: Factsheet



Evidence ratings:

This resource has undergone expert review. See our Help/Q&A section for more details.

Year: Year 9–10, Year 11–12

Targeted Drugs: Heroin

Tags: opiates, smack

Time Allocated: Partial lesson (under 45mins)

Origin: Australian

Cost:
Free

What is heroin?

Heroin is also known as hammer, gear, or smack.

Heroin is one of a group of drugs known as opiates. Opiates are natural products of the opium poppy and also include opium, morphine, and codeine. For more information, see What are opioids?

In Australia, heroin can be a fine powder, granules or rocks. It is normally white or off-white in colour, although it is sometimes brown. It is most commonly injected, but is also snorted, smoked, or heated and the vapours inhaled (known as chasing the dragon). It can be sold 'cut' (mixed) with a range of substances that can also be harmful. This makes it hard for the user to know the purity of what they are taking.

Heroin is considered to be the second most addictive drug after tobacco.

How many young people have tried heroin?

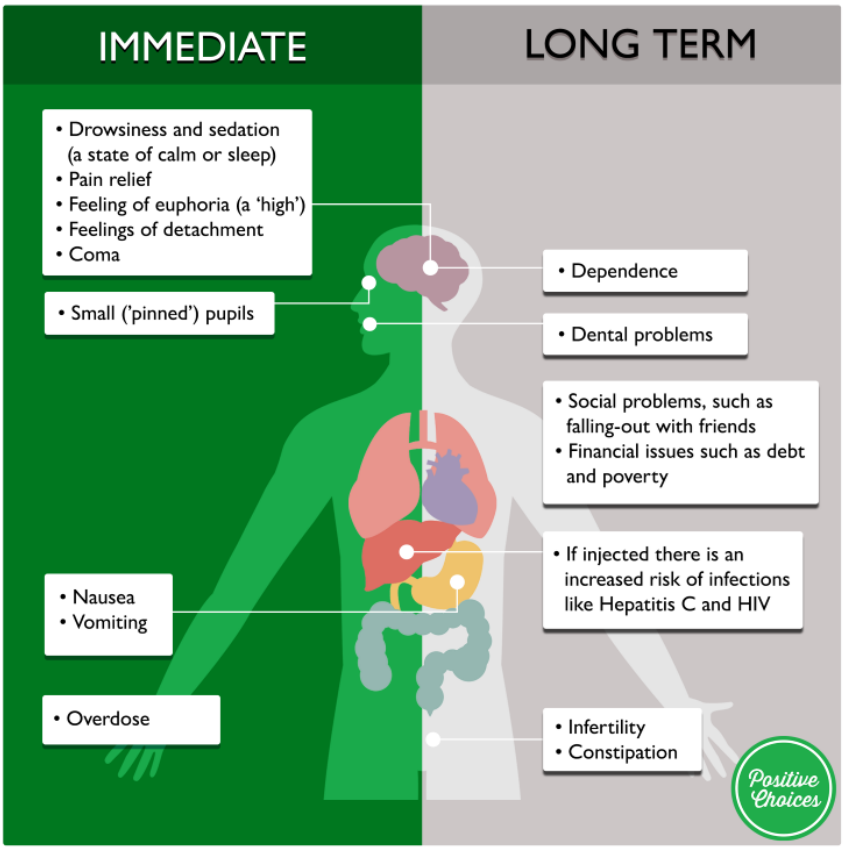
According to the 2022-2023 Australian secondary schools' alcohol and drug survey, 1 in 500 students (0.2%) aged 12-17 used heroin in the past month.

What are the effects of heroin?

Heroin produces a 'rush' within seconds of injecting or smoking it. If snorted, it takes about 5 minutes to feel the effects. The effects of heroin can last for approximately 3–5 hours.

The effects of heroin can be immediate or long-term, as listed in the table below.

Immediate	Long-term
Small ('pinned') pupils	Dependence (see glossary)
Drowsiness and sedation (a state of calm or sleep)	Dental problems
Pain relief	Constipation
Feeling of euphoria (a 'high')	If injected there is an increased risk of infections like Hepatitis C and HIV
Feelings of detachment	Infertility
Nausea and vomiting	Social problems, such as falling-out with friends
Overdose	Financial issues such as debt and poverty
Coma	



Evidence Base

This factsheet was developed following expert review by researchers at the Matilda Centre for Research in Mental Health and Substance Use at the University of Sydney, the National Drug & Alcohol Research Centre at the University of New South Wales, and the National Drug Research Institute at Curtin University.

Sources

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