

## Opiates – morphine and heroin

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Opiates can be divided into natural and synthetic opiates; collectively they are called opioids. Natural opiates are derived from the opium poppy (*Papaver somniferum*). From the dried 'milk' of the poppy, opium is derived. Morphine and codeine are made from raw opium and can further be refined into heroin. Synthetic opiates include methadone and pethidine. Opiates have been used as medicines for a long time. Today, morphine is used as a pain relief e.g. for terminally ill cancer patients. Certain cough medicines and pain killers contain codeine.

Opium is sold as dark brown lumps or powder. It is usually eaten or smoked. Heroin, when sold at street, is usually diluted with other powders (often with glucose) and its colour varies from white to brown. The mixes contain a very varying amount of pure heroin. Heroin can be taken orally, intravenously or it can be smoked. Narcotic pain killers are sold as capsules, tablets, liquid or suppositories.

The effects of opiates, like those of other intoxicants, depend on the user's state of mind and on the company the user is in. Whether an opiate is used on its own or together with other intoxicants, and whether the user is a novice or an experienced user also have an influence on the effects of the drug. Opiates are central nervous system depressants. Immediately after taking the drug the user will experience a rush of euphoria. Feelings of hunger and pain are suppressed, along with sexual desire. Novice users may also feel nauseous and restless. Higher doses will make the user feel warm, his limbs feel heavy and his mouth dry. The user will feel alternately alert and drowsy, introvert. At even higher doses the pupils become constricted and the skin feels cold and clammy and turns bluish. A fatal respiratory failure may develop. There is always a danger of an overdose when the drug is bought on the street as it is very difficult to determine how strong the mixture is.

The risks of regular, long-term drug use are often related to the way the drug is taken. Dirty needles, unhygienic conditions and impure drugs may damage the body and cause infections. A person using shared needles is at risk of catching viral infections, like AIDS and hepatitis B or C. Heroin sniffing damages the nose. The pain relieving effects of opiates may lead the user to overlook physical symptoms, like tooth aches and various infections, that are in fact signs of conditions that may prove fatal if they are not treated.

The regular use of opiates leads to increased tolerance and consequently the user needs to take higher and higher doses in order to achieve the desired effect. Regular, long-term use of opiates may lead to physical and psychological dependence. The withdrawal symptoms are strong. If the user has taken opiates regularly, the withdrawal symptoms may appear after only a few hours have passed since the last dose and peak after 2-3 days. The symptoms include aches, nausea, fever, trembling, convulsions, sweating and shivering.

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