

## HOW CAN YOU TELL IF SOMEONE HAS OVERDOSED?

### Signs of heroin overdose include:

- The person may collapse, or may drift slowly into unconsciousness
- Very slow, shallow breathing
- Pinpoint pupils
- Blue lips, fingernails, skin. This may not be a good sign to look for in darker skinned people.
- Not responding to anything
- Fits
- Increased blood pressure
- Coma
- Snoring or gurgling as fluid builds in the lungs
- Looking as if they have drifted off to sleep

## DEALING WITH OVERDOSE

If a person looks as if they have overdosed DON'T leave them to get over it. Keep calm and:

- Put them in the recovery position (some people call this the coma position)
- Dial triple zero (000) and ask for an ambulance
- Do what the ambulance officers say
- Stay with the person, even after they have revived

Remember! It only takes a few minutes for someone who has stopped breathing to die. Police will not usually be called unless the ambulance officers feel hassled or someone has died. However sometimes police may choose to attend an overdose.

## HELP FOR HEROIN USERS

If a person is concerned about their heroin use, they need to be encouraged to get help from their local Aboriginal Health Worker, doctor or a drug and alcohol service.

Families and friends who are worried about someone who is using heroin can also get support and information from these places.

## RECOVERY POSITION



**ABORIGINAL  
DRUG AND ALCOHOL  
COUNCIL (SA) INC.**



**INDIGENOUS  
SUBSTANCE MISUSE  
HEALTH PROMOTION UNIT.**

The Resource Package about Illicit Drugs for Indigenous Workers has been produced at the Aboriginal Drug & Alcohol Council (SA) Inc. Design and layout has been done by the Indigenous Substance Misuse Health Promotion Unit.

All the information in the pamphlet is believed to be accurate at January 2004. As ADAC has no control over the way that this pamphlet will be used, or by whom, we disclaim any responsibility for the outcomes of training or interventions which rely on, or make use of this material.



# HEROIN

Important things  
to know!

## WHAT IS IT?

Heroin slows down body functions - thinking, feeling and behaviour. A person will see and feel things in different ways.

## WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE?

Heroin comes from the opium poppy plant. Other drugs made from the opium poppy include opium, morphine and codeine. It looks like white, dirty white or brown powder or gravel (rock). Sometimes the rock is brown or pink. Heroin is sold in small aluminium foils or balloons. To make it go further, the person selling the heroin will usually mix ('cut') it with other powders like sugar or baking powder.

## HOW IS IT USED?

Heroin is usually injected using a needle and syringe. Using it is called 'having a taste'. It can also be smoked or the vapours can be inhaled. Inhaling is sometimes called 'chasing the dragon'.

## WHO USES IT AND WHY?

People use drugs for many different reasons: frustration, boredom, difficulties and problems with other people, curiosity and because it may make a person feel good for a short time. Some people use it **a few times** and then decide they don't like it. A few say they can use it **occasionally**, maybe when they are with friends or family. Other people use it **every day** and some may come to feel that they can't do without it. This is called being dependent or having a '**habit**'. Each way of using may have its own problems. First time users may not know how much is safe to take and may overdose. Heavy users run a greater risk of legal, physical and mental health problems.

## WHAT EFFECTS DOES IT HAVE?

Heroin can affect different people in different ways. In general, when a person uses heroin they will feel a strong rush of pleasure, and get relief from any pains or worries. After this they may get slow and sleepy. They can 'nod off' – fall asleep momentarily. Breathing, blood pressure and pulse rate will all slow down.

The effects of heroin can last four or more hours depending on how much was taken and the strength of the heroin.

Because of its effects it can be dangerous for a person to drive or operate machinery when they are under the influence of heroin

## LONG TERM USE

People who use heroin heavily (every day) risk developing problems with:

**Health:** these problems are usually associated with injecting. The other powders that heroin is mixed with can cause heart and lung infections. Unsafe injecting can cause ulcers, collapsed veins and blood poisoning. Other problems come from sharing injecting equipment: hepatitis B and C, HIV/AIDS. The person may also be at risk of anaemia, malnutrition, constipation, irregular periods and infertility.

**Family and community problems:** not taking care of responsibilities, spending a lot of money on heroin and worried family and friends.

**Mental and emotional problems:** the kind of lifestyle that a person has when they are using heroin heavily and for a long time can lead to mental and emotional problems like anxiety and depression.

**The law:** because heroin is illegal, users may have problems with the law. Heroin is expensive and a person may get involved in crime to pay for their drug. Many young Aboriginal people are in prison because of drug-related crime.

**Needing it all the time:** People who use heroin daily may find they need to use more and more of it to get the same effect. They can get to the point where they feel that they need a taste to be able to do anything at all – they become dependent on heroin, and it is the most important thing in their their life.

**Coming off heroin:** Heroin users who have a habit will have withdrawals if they decide to stop using or can't get their regular shot. Withdrawal is not dangerous but it can be very uncomfortable. Signs include sweating, cramps, restlessness, vomiting and wanting to use again. Most people will need some kind of help and support to get through heroin withdrawal.

## OVERDOSE & MIXING DRUGS

Overdose can happen when a person uses too much heroin at once. How much is too much depends on the strength of the heroin, how it is used and how often the person has used it in the past.

It is never a good idea to mix heroin with other drugs. Deaths from overdose are often caused by a person using drugs like alcohol or benzodiazapines and heroin at the same time.

## HEROIN AND PREGNANCY

Heroin can harm an unborn baby. If a woman is using heroin and becomes pregnant she needs to talk to her doctor and be honest with them because stopping heroin use during pregnancy can put the baby at risk.

## KEEPING HEROIN USERS SAFE

### OVERDOSE

If someone you know uses heroin, they may overdose. If you know what the signs of overdose are and what to do if it happens, you may be able to save their life.