



## Heroin

### What Is It?

Heroin is an opioid drug made from morphine, a substance extracted from certain poppy plants. It is a depressant that slows your body and mind. **It is highly addictive!**

Heroin goes by many other names including: H, junk, skag, dope, dust, horse, smack, China White.

***WARNING: Buyer Beware!*** “Heroin” sold on streets (including in NWT) is usually a very dangerous mixture of potentially lethal synthetic (man-made) opioids like fentanyl and other additives.

### What Does It Look Like?

Heroin can look like a white or brownish powder, or a black sticky substance known as “black tar heroin.” There can be variations in color and consistency.

### How Does It Work?

Heroin enters the brain rapidly, making it very addictive. It tells the brain to release a chemical (dopamine) in the body, giving a temporary feeling of happiness and euphoria. After the initial “rush”, people using heroin often enter a slow, dreamy state, with delayed thinking, actions, and body movements.

### Why Is It Dangerous?

Heroin and other opioids are very strong painkillers, which makes them highly addictive. Heroin can have widespread effects on a person's life including physical, mental, and social harms.

Short-term health effects of heroin use include:

- Drowsiness, dizziness, confusion
- Overheating
- Upset stomach & vomiting
- Itching or warm feeling on the skin
- Breathing slows down, or can stop
- Heart rate slows down, or can stop

Long-term heroin use can lead to widespread health effects including organ damage (for example – the heart, liver, kidneys, and lungs), infections, and mental health problems. Because people using heroin do not know the actual strength of the drug or its true contents, they are at a high risk of overdose or death.

If a person tries to stop using opioids suddenly, they can be at high risk for relapse and overdose due to changes in tolerance. **Avoid quitting “cold turkey” – talk to a health care provider about it first.**

### What Does Opioid Toxicity Look Like?

Heroin is an opioid – signs of opioid overdose may include:



- Slow, shallow breathing or no breathing
- Not moving and can't be woken
- Blue lips and nails
- Person may be choking, making gurgling sounds, or snoring
- Cold, clammy skin
- Tiny pupils

If you suspect someone may have opioid toxicity **call 9-1-1** immediately and give Naloxone! The **Good Samaritan Drug Overdose Act** protects you from drug possession charges when helping in an overdose situation.

### Safer Use Tips

There is **no** safe way to use heroin. If you are using heroin, here are some tips to decrease your risk:

- **Start low and go slow.** Start with a “tester dose” and wait before taking more. Be aware that pausing or reducing use, even for a few days, can significantly lower tolerance – starting low and going slow can decrease the risk of a fatal overdose.
- **Don't use alone.** If you are using alone, call NORS - the National Overdose Response Service Hotline, at 1-888-688-NORS (6677) so you can get help if you need it.
- **Don't mix with other substances,** including alcohol and prescription or over the counter medications.
- **Don't share equipment!** Sharing drug equipment like needles, pipes or spoons, increases risk of infection. Contaminated equipment can spread several serious diseases, such as HIV, hepatitis B, and hepatitis C.
- If smoking from a pipe, don't use steel wool or Brillo as a filter. Use brass screens instead.
- **Stay hydrated.** Drink water and use lip balm.
- **Take a photo of the drug before you use it.** If you end up getting sick, this can help keep other people safe and makes it easier to help you.
- **Know the signs of an opioid overdose and act!** Stay within cell range or have access to a satellite phone in case you need to call 9-1-1. **Always carry Naloxone with you** if you or people you know use illicit drugs, since they can be cut with potentially lethal synthetic (man-made) opioids like fentanyl. Kits are available for free at locations across the NWT – **make sure your kit doesn't freeze.**

### Need Help?

Reach out to your local health centre, community counsellor/mental health professional, or call 8-1-1.