

SWANSEA DRUG NOTES NO. 4
HEROIN
(Smack, Scag, H, Horse, Brown)

HEROIN

Heroin has become more common in Swansea since 1997. Previous to 1997 Swansea had very little heroin use and was rarely available on a regular basis. Heroin is responsible for more deaths than any other illegal street drug. As well as causing death from accidental overdoses it is responsible for increasing numbers of injectors picking up serious infections – including Hepatitis C and HIV.

WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE

Heroin is sold as a brown off-white powder. It is commonly sold in small envelopes (called wraps) of varying amounts. In the past few years the price has remained steady and has even gone down. It is possible to buy a 'wrap' for £10.00.

It is impossible to tell what strength the powder actually is. Recent samples have varied from 45%-70% heroin. Cutting agents are usually lactose or glucose but have included paracetamol, mannitol, barbiturates and even quinine.

HOW IT IS USED

The drug can be:

Smoked – by putting a 'line' on foil, applying heat, and inhaling the vapour through a tube. This is called 'chasing the dragon'. It can also be put in a cigarette and smoked like a 'reefer'.

Injected – by dissolving the powder in water. Illegal heroin needs to be heated and made slightly acid to dissolve fully. People commonly use ascorbic acid. It can be injected into a vein or less commonly into a muscle or under the skin.

Snorted – by sniffing through the mucous membranes of the nose.

WHAT THE EFFECTS ARE

Heroin is derived from opium and is a powerful painkiller used widely in medicine. It makes people feel warm, content and distances the experience of physical and emotional pain. Breathing is also depressed. The pupils of the eye become constricted ('pinned'). Allergic reactions can cause itching. New users will feel nauseous and will often 'throw up'.

HOW LONG DOES IT STAY IN THE BODY

Heroin can be found in urine for up to 48 hours after use.

WHAT ARE THE DANGERS

Strength will vary from batch to batch, accurate doses are therefore impossible to judge.

People will generally fall asleep before passing into a coma and then dying. Friends often assume (wrongly) that someone will wake up in the morning none the worse.

Doses may need to be taken quickly in unsterile situations.

Hepatitis C and HIV can be spread through shared injecting equipment. Serious other illnesses can be caused by street injecting.

Finally the mixing of heroin with anything like ALCOHOL, VALIUM, BARBITURATES, etc. greatly increases the danger. Even quite small amounts of heroin become fatal if mixed with other drugs.

Serious other illnesses can be caused by injecting powders.

WHAT ARE THE LONGER TERM EFFECTS

Regular use will lead to tolerance developing (the need to take a larger dose to obtain the same effects).

Physical addiction will also develop. This means that the body will only function properly with a dose of the drug. Any abrupt cessation will lead to withdrawal symptoms – which include anxiety, panic attacks, shivering (goose flesh, hence cold turkey), running nose and eyes, yawning, diarrhoea and vomiting, muscle cramps and spasms (hence 'kicking the habit') and insomnia.

They will get worse over 5 days and then gradually reduce. The worst physical symptoms will be over in about 10 days.

Less intense but equally difficult symptoms can continue for some months – in particular craving.

SIMILAR DRUGS

Heroin is called an opiate. Other drugs in this group have similar effects, side effects and dangers. They include morphine, palfium, methadone, pethidine and are all used to control serious pain. Codeine and dihydrocodeine are also in this group and are used to control moderate pain.

THE PRINCIPAL RISKS AND HOW TO HELP

The Law – Heroin is a Class A drug (Misuse of Drugs Act 1971), possession is a serious offence. The sharing, giving, lending or selling of even very small amounts is dealing (supply).

Overdose – If someone cannot be easily roused, try to wake them, call an ambulance and begin mouth to mouth etc. Hospitals stock a drug called Narcan which is an antidote. Never try your own remedies.

Addicts are more likely to overdose after a period in prison or treatment when their tolerance has reduced.

Accidents – Anyone who is intoxicated must not drive, operate heavy machinery etc.

Injecting – Sharing any injecting equipment including syringes, needles, spoons, water, etc. – even if they have been washed out – has a risk of catching Hepatitis C and HIV. Swansea has a range of confidential needle exchange schemes.

Other help for new users – drugs education can be helpful when given carefully; encouraging other activities, in adolescents encouraging other risk taking and self awareness developments. Learn to talk and to listen without lecturing.

How to Help Dependent Users;

Addiction – Heroin is a very seductive drug and it is easy for regular use to slip into addiction. Any daily use for over 6 weeks is likely to lead to physical addiction (this will happen far more quickly in people who have been addicted previously). If someone who is addicted suddenly stops using they will experience withdrawal symptoms. Treatment should be considered as quickly as possible. However addiction does not happen quickly or by accident and there are no quick and easy solutions. Available treatments will take time to arrange. It is usually necessary to involve a specialist agency. Treatment can include home detoxification, inpatient detoxification, prescribing of substitute drugs for a short time, or for a longer time, psychological help and self-help groups. There will inevitably be ups and downs. However, the majority of heroin addicts do recover eventually.

Finance – whilst small amounts of heroin are relatively cheap, regular use can be very expensive. Once tolerance and addiction have built up funding heroin use can cause significant problems. You will need to think about how you will respond to requests for money. Funding regular illegal heroin use sometimes leads to offending.

Well Being – Heroin users will often neglect their health, relationships and general wellbeing. They can be malnourished and sometimes have numerous social problems. These will need to be dealt with.

Swansea Drugs Notes

A series of information leaflets published by

Swansea Local Action Team. (LAT)

(Co-ordinating substance misuse prevention, education and treatment)

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Swansea Drugs Project (SAND)

(Charity No. 517326)