



WHAT & WHY?

HEROIN 5

smack : brown : skag : diamorphine : H

No. 5 in a series of guides to help people understand
what drugs are and why people take them

SECOND EDITION



What?

Heroin is made from the sap of the opium poppy, *Papaver somniferum*, which has been the most effective painkiller known to medicine for at least 7000 years.

The pharmaceutical name for heroin is diamorphine.





Minimum amounts used usually cost £5–£10. If heroin is taken every day for more than a couple of weeks, the body becomes physically dependent, i.e. gets used to its presence and reacts if the person stops taking it. This reaction is called withdrawals. Using as little as £10 worth a day can create a level of physical dependence. **Regular use also brings tolerance to the effects of the drug and dependent users either have to take breaks from using heroin or gradually increase consumption in order to feel the effects.** Some users may spend in excess of £100 per day and still feel very little effect other than the absence of withdrawal symptoms.

In contrast to legal drugs such as tobacco and alcohol, heroin itself does not damage any major organ (including the brain). However, injecting can lead to serious (preventable) health problems, including viral infection and overdose. The social problems associated with heroin use mainly stem from its illegality which keeps the drug expensive and encourages users to stay within a criminalised heroin-using social circle.

The problems of heroin being cut with dangerous substances and the overdose risks of 'pure batches' are media myths. The evidence shows that loss of tolerance following a detox, and using combinations of drugs with heroin, are much more dangerous.

Why?

The effects of heroin are powerful. Most people experience a sense of the drug rushing through their body, bringing a very powerful, pleasant, relaxing effect, with a dream-like state of inner warmth and complete emotional insulation from all of life's problems.





Not everyone enjoys the sense of detachment, and some first-time users describe an overwhelming feeling of discomfort. One effect of heroin that can be unpleasant is its tendency to slow the action of the intestine. This can induce sickness, and although people usually become tolerant to this, most dependent heroin users suffer from constipation.

There is no simple answer to the question of why people take, or become dependent on, heroin. It is probably most helpful to try and understand heroin use on an individual basis, weighing up the relative importance of factors to do with: **the person** – their psychological make-up, history, mood, emotional state, self-esteem and expectations of the drug; **the drug** – the physical and psychological effects of the drug on the individual and its power to remove withdrawal symptoms; and **society** – the ease with which the drug can be bought, the number of people using it, the attitudes of the person's peer group to the drug, employment status etc.

Although some users may take it occasionally, heroin offers most users an unparalleled state of mind. Once used, many find it difficult not to keep going back for more. Dependence often takes weeks, months or even years to develop. The pattern is usually one of reducing times between occasions of heroin use, and moving from single doses every now and then to taking it every day for longer and longer periods.





01 Smoking heroin, known as 'chasing the dragon'

Photo: David Hoffman Photo Library



02 Papaver somniferum – the opium poppy

Photo: A–Z Botanical Picture Agency



03 Heroin in a wrap

Photo: Murdo Macleod Photo Library



04 Chasing the dragon

Photo: Jamie Baker/Demon Imaging



05 Injecting

Photo: Jamie Baker/Demon Imaging



06 Heating the heroin, water and citric acid solution to help the drug dissolve

Photo: Jamie Baker/Demon Imaging



07 Injecting paraphernalia

Photo: Jamie Baker/Demon Imaging

Written by **Andrew Preston**

What & Why? 5: Heroin. Second edition.

Published by Exchange Supplies.

ISBN 1-903346-04-5

© Exchange Supplies 2000–2004.

Designed by fluke.

Printed in the UK on recycled paper made from 100% chlorine-free post-consumer waste.

Responsibility for all errors, omissions and opinions lies with the author.

Exchange Supplies is an independent social enterprise producing information and resources to reduce drug-related harm. For more information go to: www.exchangesupplies.org

The What & Why? series covers cannabis, amphetamine, ecstasy, cocaine, heroin, methadone and harm reduction.

All titles in the series are available direct from: **Exchange Supplies**, tel: 01305 262244.

Additional information on LSD, mushrooms, addiction and motivation are available on our website:

www.exchangesupplies.org

Exchange Supplies, 1 Great Western Industrial Centre, Dorchester, Dorset DT1 1RD.

Tel: 01305 262244 Fax: 01305 262255 Email: info@exchangesupplies.org

www.exchangesupplies.org



What & Why? is a series of booklets for anyone who wants to understand illicit drug use.

Illustrated with stunning photography, What & Why? explains what drugs are (how they are made, sold and used), their effects and why people choose to take them.

Essential reading for anyone confronted with illicit drug use at home or at work.

What & Why? is written mainly for professionals, parents and the relatives and friends of drug users. The booklets may also provide a useful contribution to secondary school discussion about drugs.



www.exchangesupplies.org