

## Heroin and pregnancy

### KEY POINTS

- If you use heroin during pregnancy, it can cause serious problems for your baby, like premature birth, NAS, birth defects and stillbirth.
- If you're pregnant and using heroin, don't stop taking it without getting treatment from your health care provider first.
- Quitting heroin suddenly (going cold turkey) can cause severe problems for your baby, including death.
- Treatment with drugs like methadone or buprenorphine can help you reduce your dependence on heroin in a way that's safe for your baby.

---

### What is heroin?

Heroin (also called smack or junk) is an opioid drug. Opioids are made from seeds from poppy plants. Prescription opioids, like oxycodone, morphine and codeine, are used as painkillers after an injury or surgery. You need a prescription from your health care provider to get these kinds of medicine.

Heroin is a street (illegal) drug made from the opioid morphine. Heroin can be a white or brown powder, or it can be a black, sticky goo called black tar heroin. Heroin can be injected, smoked, snorted or sniffed.

Sometimes people use a prescription opioid and become addicted to it. Drug addiction is a brain condition that makes you use drugs, even if they're harmful to you. Addiction affects your self-control and your ability to stop taking a drug. When a person becomes addicted to prescription opioids, she may try to buy them illegally. People often start using heroin after becoming addicted to prescription opioids. Heroin often is mixed with the opioid fentanyl to make it stronger.

### Can using heroin harm your health?

Yes. Heroin affects your central nervous system and how your brain works. It can make you feel itchy, sleepy and sick to your stomach. Using heroin can cause serious health problems, including:

- Addiction
- Coma. This is when you're unconscious for a long period of time and can't respond to voices, sounds or activity.
- Heart and lung infections
- Infections like HIV or hepatitis (when heroin is injected with a dirty or shared needle)
- Kidney and liver disease
- Respiratory failure. This is when too little oxygen passes from your lungs into your blood or when your lungs can't remove carbon dioxide (a gas) from your blood.

### Can heroin cause problems in pregnancy?

Yes. Using heroin during pregnancy can be dangerous, even deadly. It may cause serious problems, including:

- Birth defects. These are health conditions that are present at birth. Birth defects change the shape or function of one or more parts of the body. They can cause problems in overall health, how the body develops, or in how the body works.
- Placental abruption. This is a serious condition in which the placenta separates from the wall of the uterus before birth. The placenta supplies the baby with food and oxygen through the umbilical cord. Placental abruption can cause very heavy bleeding and can be deadly for both mother and baby.
- Premature birth. This is birth that happens too early, before 37 weeks of pregnancy.
- Low birthweight. This is when a baby is born weighing less than 5 pounds, 8 ounces.
- Neonatal abstinence syndrome (also called NAS). NAS happens when a baby is exposed to a drug in the womb before birth and then goes through drug withdrawal after birth.

- **Stillbirth.** This is when a baby dies in the womb after 20 weeks of pregnancy.
- **Sudden infant death syndrome (also SIDS).** This is the unexplained death of a baby younger than 1 year old.

If you're pregnant and using heroin, don't stop taking it without getting treatment from your health care provider first. Quitting suddenly (sometimes called cold turkey) can cause severe problems for your baby, including death. Your health care provider or a drug-treatment center can treat you with drugs like methadone or buprenorphine. These drugs can help you gradually reduce your dependence on heroin in a way that's safe for your baby.

### How can you get help to quit using heroin or any street drug?

Talk to your health care provider. She can help you get treatment to quit. Or contact:

- National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence  
(800) 622-2255
- Substance Abuse Treatment Facility Locator  
(800) 662-4357

### More information

National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA)

*Last reviewed: July, 2016*

---