Department of Justice/Drug Enforcement Administration

Drug Fact Sheet

Narcotics

WHAT ARE NARCOTICS?

Also known as “opioids,” the term “narcotic” comes from the Greek word for “stupor” and originally referred to a variety of substances that dulled the senses and relieved pain. Though some people still refer to all drugs as “narcotics,” today “narcotic” refers to opium, opium derivatives, and their semi-synthetic substitutes. A more current term for these drugs, with less uncertainty regarding its meaning, is “opioid.” Examples include the illicit drug heroin and pharmaceutical drugs like OxyContin®, Vicodin®, codeine, morphine, methadone, and fentanyl.

WHAT IS THEIR ORIGIN?

The poppy *Papaver somniferum* is the source for all natural opioids, whereas synthetic opioids are made entirely in a lab and include meperidine, fentanyl, and methadone. Semi-synthetic opioids are synthesized from naturally occurring opium products, such as morphine and codeine, and include heroin, oxycodone, hydrocodone, and hydromorphone. Teens can obtain narcotics from friends, family members, medicine cabinets, pharmacies, nursing homes, hospitals, hospices, doctors, and the Internet.

What are common street names?

Street names for various narcotics/opioids include:

- Smack, Horse, Mud, Brown Sugar, Junk, Black Tat, Big H, Paregoric, Dover’s Powder, MPTP (New Heroin), Hillbilly Heroin, Lean or Purple Drank, OC, Ox, Oxy, Oxycotton, Sippin Syrup

OxyContin® 160 mg tablet

Heroin

What do they look like?

Narcotics/opioids come in various forms, including:

- Tablets, capsules, skin patches, powder, chunks in varying colors (from white to shades of brown and black), liquid form for oral use and injection, syrups, suppositories, and lollipops

How are they abused?

- Narcotics/opioids can be swallowed, smoked, sniffed, or injected.

What is their effect on the mind?

Besides their medical use, narcotics/opioids produce a general sense of well-being by reducing tension, anxiety, and aggression. These effects are helpful in a therapeutic setting but contribute to the drugs’ abuse. Narcotic/opioid use comes with a variety of unwanted effects, including drowsiness, inability to concentrate, and apathy.

Psychological dependence

Use can create psychological dependence. Long after the physical need for the drug has passed, the user may continue to think and talk about using drugs and feel overwhelmed coping with daily activities. Relapse is common if there are no changes to the physical environment or the behavioral motivators that prompted the abuse in the first place.

What is their effect on the body?

Narcotics/opioids are prescribed by doctors to treat pain and diarrhea, suppress cough, and put people to sleep. Effects depend heavily on the the dose, how it is taken, and previous exposure to the drug. Negative effects include:

- Slowed physical activity, constriction of the pupils, flushing of the face and neck, constipation, nausea, vomiting, and slowed breathing

As the dose is increased, both the pain relief and the harmful effects become more pronounced. Some of these preparations are so potent that a single dose can be lethal to an inexperienced user. However, except in cases of extreme intoxication, there is no loss of motor coordination or slurred speech.

Physical dependence and withdrawal

Physical dependence is a consequence of chronic opioid use, and withdrawal takes place when drug use is discontinued. The intensity and character of the physical symptoms experienced during withdrawal are directly related to the particular drug used, the total daily dose, the interval between doses, the duration of use, and the health and personality of the user. These symptoms usually appear shortly before the time of the next scheduled dose.

Early withdrawal symptoms often include:

- Watery eyes, runny nose, yawning, and sweating

As the withdrawal worsens, symptoms can include:

- Restlessness, irritability, loss of appetite, nausea, tremors, drug craving, severe depression, vomiting, increased heart rate and blood pressure, and chills alternating with flushing and excessive sweating

However, without intervention, the withdrawal usually runs its course, and most physical symptoms disappear within days or weeks, depending on the particular drug.

What are their overdose effects?

Overdoses of narcotics are not uncommon and can be fatal. Physical signs of narcotics/opioid overdose include:

- Constricted (pinpoint) pupils, cold clammy skin, confusion, convulsions, extreme drowsiness, and slowed breathing

Which drugs cause similar effects?

With the exception of pain relief and cough suppression, most central nervous system depressants (like barbiturates, benzodiazepines, and alcohol) have similar effects, including slowed breathing, tolerance, and dependence.

What is their legal status in the United States?

Narcotics/opioids are controlled substances that vary from Schedule I to Schedule V, depending on their medical usefulness, abuse potential, safety, and drug dependence profile. Schedule I narcotics, like heroin, have no medical use in the U.S. and are illegal to distribute, purchase, or use outside of medical research.