

# Prescription Opioids and Heroin

## Student Supplement

### Information and Facts for Educators and Youth

*Part of the exemplary Project ALERT curriculum developed by RAND*

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#### Student Instructions for Activity #1

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Using this guide, students will break out into groups and create two lists - one that lists things about prescription opioids and one that lists things about heroin.

Look for **text in bold** to help you create your lists.



# Prescription Opioids

## What Are Prescription Opioids?

**Prescription** opioids are drugs that are used to treat pain and discomfort. They are **legal**, man-made medications that are usually manufactured in an **approved lab**. They should only be used when you are under a **doctor's care**. The most popular opioids are in **pill form**, and include names like Vicodin, OxyContin (or Oxy), Percocet, and codeine. Many prescription cough syrups also contain codeine.



## How Do Prescription Opioids Make People “High”?

Prescription opioids go right to the brain. They tell the brain to **prevent the body from experiencing pain**. Painful feelings are replaced with pleasant feelings or what is sometimes called a “high.” When you keep taking the drug over a long period of time, you **need more and more of it** to feel the same effects and to function normally.

## Why Do Teens Use Prescription Opioids?

Sometime doctors prescribe these medicines for teens to help them with physical pain. Athletes may use them before games to help with the pain of a **sports injury**. Teenagers may also use them for the **pain of migraines or menstrual cramps**. While **most people do not use** prescription opioids, some teens will use them just to feel their effects, even though they're not in any pain.

## Why Is It Dangerous to Take Opioids That Are Not Prescribed for You?

The most important reason for not using prescription opioids that aren't prescribed for you is that the drugs can be deadly. An overdose can **cut off your breathing** and result in **brain damage** and **death, even with only one dose**. And, unfortunately, it is easy to overdose.

These drugs come in many forms and strengths, and the correct dosage is different for every person, and teens often have **no idea what they are really taking**. Many teens do not even know what the drugs are for, or which pills are more powerful than others. They also don't know what dosages are dangerous and how these drugs react when combined with other drugs, such as alcohol, marijuana, or Ritalin. **Combining drugs is extremely dangerous** and can affect coordination and doing simple tasks, or can cause death from stroke, heart attack, or respiratory failure (**inability to breathe**). Sometimes, these drugs are made in illegal labs. Opioids that are purchased "on the street" or from a friend are considered **illegal**, and they can be very dangerous, since it's not known where they came from or what is actually in them. The only opioids you should ever take should be prescribed by your doctor, purchased from a pharmacy, and taken according to your doctor's instructions while you are under his or her care.



## Are There Other Effects Besides Pain Relief or A "High"?

Yes. Prescription opioids can **slow down your breathing**, make you tired, and cause **nausea**.

## Are Prescription Opioids Addictive?

Using prescription opioids to treat pain from a minor injury can lead to **addiction** very quickly. The more often teenagers use these drugs, the larger the dose they need the next time to get the same effect. Because of this, doctors are very careful when prescribing these drugs and only prescribe a dose that will work **for a specific patient and for a short period of time**. If they are used in a way that is different from these restrictions, it is considered **illegal**.

Continued use of these drugs produces both mental and physical cravings. When teens become dependent on these drugs, finding and using them becomes the main focus of life. Mental symptoms of taking the drug away include depression and anxiety. Physical symptoms include stomach cramps, aches, sweating, chills, nausea, **shaking**, and trouble sleeping. Even after treatment for addiction, it is very difficult for the user to stay away from the drug.

# Heroin

## What Is Heroin?

Heroin is a very addictive, **illegal** drug made from opium **poppy plants**. It is grown in Asia, Mexico, and South America. It is usually sold as a **white or brownish powder**. **Most people do not use** heroin, but sometimes when a person can't get a prescription for opioids anymore, they may start using heroin for pain.



*Field of opium poppies*



*Opium gum oozing from a poppy plant*

Street names for heroin include *smack*, *junk*, *H*, *black tar*, and *horse*. Slang phrases for using it include *skagging* and *chasing the dragon*. Heroin can be **injected, snorted, sniffed, or smoked**. After taking it, the user goes through times of feeling very sleepy and then feeling wide awake. Heroin is often **mixed with (or "cut or laced with") other substances** (like sugar, baking soda, and baby powder), so a user has **no idea what they are really putting into their body**. All forms of heroin are very dangerous and very **addictive**.

## How Does Heroin Make People "High"?

Heroin goes right to your brain. It works by telling the brain to **prevent the body from experiencing pain or discomfort**. Painful feelings are replaced with pleasant feelings or what's called a "high." When you keep taking heroin over a long period of time, you **need more and more of it** to feel the same effects and to function normally. This can cause many physical problems, including **breathing difficulty** and problems with physical coordination, and lead to overdose and death.



*Prescription opioids and heroin take control of the brain*

## Does Heroin Affect Everyone in the Same Way?

No. Since everyone's body is different, the effect you might feel can be different from what someone else might feel. **Using it just one time is dangerous enough to cause an overdose or death.** Any heroin user can become addicted to it, and some people will become addicted much faster than others.



*Heroin in white powder form*

## Are There Other Effects Besides a “High”?

Yes. Heroin's strongest effects last about 15 minutes, but it can continue to affect your body for up to 5 hours. Heroin can cause things like speech, thinking, and movement to slow down; simple things like tying your shoe or walking may take longer to do. Over time, the body and brain start to *need* heroin to do these basic functions.

## Are There Long-term Effects of Using Heroin?

Heroin affects the brain's ability to help you think clearly and control your actions. It can affect your memory, and your ability to make decisions. Using heroin for a long time can cause you to need larger doses to keep you feeling the same way. This can turn into an endless cycle of **wanting more and more of the drug**, causing you to do things you never thought you would do in order to get it.

Heroin addiction, like addiction to other drugs, causes things like severe sweating and anxiety, shaking, **difficulty in breathing**, frequent relapses (quitting for a time, then using again), and the strong urge to keep using the drug without thinking about what might happen to you. The only way to recover from heroin addiction is by getting help from a doctor. Long-term users, especially those that **share injection needles**, are also at risk for many different infections, such as **hepatitis B, HIV**, and bacterial infections of the heart.

Signs of a heroin overdose include slowed breathing; blue lips and fingernails; cold, damp skin; **vomiting**; and **shaking**. A heroin overdose can cause you to **stop breathing** and prevent oxygen from reaching your brain, and can lead to coma, permanent **brain damage**, or **death**.

## Is Heroin Legal for Teens?

In all states, it is **illegal to purchase or use** heroin whether you are a teen or an adult. If you are found in **possession** of heroin, it can result in expulsion from school, the loss of friends, the ability to get a job or driver's license, trouble with law enforcement, and possibly getting charged with a felony and facing jail time.