

NARCOTICS

WHAT ARE NARCOTICS?

Narcotics are drugs that relieve pain and often induce sleep. Some of these drugs are opiates, which include opium and its derivatives morphine, codeine, and heroin. Narcotics also include certain drugs that have a morphine-like action, such as methadone.

Certain analogs of narcotic drugs have been developed, though they are not common drugs of abuse. For more information, see the Drug Analogs fact sheet in this series. However, one type of narcotic that has gained in notoriety in recent years is the painkiller OxyContin.

OxyContin, a semisynthetic opioid analgesic, is a legally prescribed painkiller used to treat chronic pain. OxyContin contains much larger doses of the active ingredient oxycodone than other prescription pain relievers do. Most people who take OxyContin as prescribed do not become addicted. Those who misuse their prescriptions, or those who take it illegally, may quickly develop an addiction to it.

OxyContin, called "Oxy," "O. C." and "killer" on the street, has also been referred to as "pharmaceutical heroin." Abusers crush the tablet, which disarms the time-release qualities. It is then snorted, ingested, or diluted with water and injected, resulting in a powerful euphoric high often compared to the effects of heroin. It is highly addictive when used in this way.

In some communities OxyContin abuse is surpassing the use of heroin. OxyContin is profitable to sell, as its street value is 5 – 10 times its prescription cost. OxyContin is thought to be responsible for a number of deaths, due to overdose, as well as crime. Young adults, who are most likely to abuse the drug, are unaware of the dangers involved with OxyContin abuse, and may mix it with alcohol and other drugs. The results are too often tragic.

Dextromethorphan is another semi-synthetic narcotic that is abused. Available over the counter, the substance is found in many cough suppressants. Referred to as "Dex", "DXM", "Robo", or "Tuss", the substance is swallowed as capsules or as cough syrup. Overdose symptoms include flushing, sweating, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, seizures, confusion, high blood pressure, irregular heartbeat, hyperactivity and hallucinations.

WHICH NARCOTICS ARE ABUSED?

All of them. Heroin accounts for most narcotic abuse in the United States. Medicinal narcotics are also abused, such as methadone, meperidine, morphine, cough syrups and painkillers containing codeine, and cough suppressants containing dextromethorphan. Various narcotics may be sniffed, swallowed, or injected.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF NARCOTIC USE?

Physical dangers depend on the specific drug, its source, and the way it is used. Many problems are caused by uncertain dose levels, impure drugs, or mixing the narcotic with other drugs. Fatal overdose is possible. The risk caused by injecting the drug is much greater than taking the drug in other ways. An overdose can result in death minutes after the injection.

Infections from non-sterile solutions, syringes, and needles cause many diseases. These include HIV/AIDS and serum hepatitis. Skin abscess, inflammation of the veins, and lung congestion also occur.

HOW MANY PEOPLE USE NARCOTICS?

According to the 2000 National Household Survey, heroin had been used in the past year by 0.2 % of those aged 12 to 17, by 0.4 % of those aged 18 to 25, and 0.1 % of those aged 26-34.

The national Monitoring the Future 2001 survey found that use of heroin in the past month was reported by 0.6% of eighth graders, 0.3% of tenth graders, and, 0.4% of twelfth graders. Use for 8th and 12th graders has doubled in the past decade.

WHO BECOMES DEPENDENT ON HEROIN OR OTHER NARCOTICS?

Any person who takes any one of these drugs can become dependent. Other factors may play a role, but use of the drug over time is the central reason. These drugs create a strong craving.

WHAT ARE THE WITHDRAWAL SYMPTOMS OF NARCOTICS?

When a dependent person stops taking the drug, withdrawal begins within 4-6 hours after the last use. Full symptoms begin 12-16 hours after the last dose. They may include shaking, sweating, vomiting, runny nose and eyes, muscle aches, chills, abdominal pains, and diarrhea. The intensity of any of these symptoms depends upon the degree of drug dependence.

Indications of possible narcotic misuse include "tracks" caused by injections, constricted or pin-point pupils, loss of appetite, sniffles, watery eyes, lethargy, drowsiness, "nodding", syringes, bent spoons, needles, etc.

WHAT IS THE TREATMENT FOR NARCOTIC DEPENDENCE?

Treatment most often includes medical care during withdrawal. Other drugs may be used to alleviate symptoms during withdrawal. Individual and group counseling are part of most treatment programs. Support from a self-help group such as Narcotics Anonymous is an important part of most recoveries. Help in learning new job and life skills is provided in many treatment programs.

Narcotic antagonists are drugs that block the "high" and other effects of

narcotics. Research has found ways to use these drugs in treatment.

WHAT IS METHADONE?

Methadone is a synthetic narcotic painkiller. It is one of several drugs used to treat dependence on heroin. It is given daily to relieve the physical craving for heroin and prevent onset of withdrawal symptoms. This allows the addict to lead a relatively normal life.

Since methadone itself causes dependence, its use is under strict regulation. Many programs later help the addict withdraw from methadone. Fatal overdose from methadone can occur if people do not use the drug properly. Most methadone deaths occur when the drug is illegally 'sold' on the street.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS OF NARCOTIC USE DURING PREGNANCY?

Narcotics used during pregnancy cause serious risks for the fetus. Fetal growth and brain development may be retarded. Fetal distress is more likely to occur. Injecting narcotics (or other drugs) also increases the risk that the baby will contract HIV/AIDS or other diseases.

Narcotic use by a pregnant woman can lead to premature or stillborn babies. The infant can be born addicted and suffer severe withdrawal symptoms, including convulsions.

Babies born to heroin-addicted mothers are more likely to have serious and lasting medical problems. They are more likely to be hyperactive, have sleep problems, and show slowed muscle and speech development.

When supervised by a physician in a specialized women and pregnancy treatment program, methadone may be appropriate in treating a pregnant woman who is dependent on narcotics.

A woman who is pregnant, considering pregnancy, or breastfeeding should not use illegal narcotics. She should discuss with her physician any use of prescription narcotics and any other drugs.

LEGAL INFORMATION

Narcotics are Controlled Substances under Michigan and Federal law. Use, possession, delivery, possession with intent to deliver, and manufacture of narcotics are illegal without appropriate license or prescription. Penalties include imprisonment and fines. Certain penalties are mandatory.

Penalties are increased if a person eighteen years or older distributes the drug to a person under eighteen, or distributes the drug near school property.

For details on the legal penalties, refer to the Michigan Law Fact Sheet in this series.

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