Heroin - Opioid addiction, part 7

What is heroin?
Heroin is an opioid drug produced from morphine. Morphine is a natural substance derived from the seed pod of the Asian opium poppy plant. Heroin is sold as a white or off-white powder, or a hard black sticky substance known as black tar. Other common names for heroin include dope, horse, junk, and smack. Some people mix heroin with crack cocaine, which is called a speedball.

How do people use heroin?
Heroin is usually injected but is also smoked and snorted. When people who inject heroin share needles, they are at risk of viral infections such as HIV, hepatitis C, and hepatitis B. There is also a risk for infections of the skin, blood, and heart. Heroin is often mixed with dangerous chemicals that can damage blood vessels leading to the lungs, liver, kidneys, or brain.

How does heroin affect the brain?
Heroin enters the brain rapidly and changes back into morphine. It affects cells in many areas of the brain, including those involved in feelings of pain and pleasure. Opioids affect areas of the brain that control important functions, such as blood pressure, arousal, and breathing. People who use heroin report feeling euphoria or high. They also may have a dry mouth, heavy feelings in the hands and feet, and clouded thinking.

Can a person overdose on heroin?
Yes. When people overdose on heroin, their breathing often slows or even stops. This can cause coma, permanent brain damage, or death.

Who is most at risk of heroin addiction?
People who are addicted to alcohol, marijuana, or cocaine are all at some increased risk for heroin addiction. People who are addicted to prescription opioid painkillers are at extreme risk for heroin addiction.

What can be done to reduce heroin addiction?
1. Prevent people from using opioids. Prescription opioid abuse can be reduced by improving how doctors approach pain management and prescription of opioids. Doctors must screen patients to identify those at risk for prescription opioid abuse. Three out of four new heroin users abused prescription opioids before trying heroin.
2. **Increase heroin addiction treatment.** Make people aware of accessible, effective drug treatment programs. Medication-Assisted Treatment or MAT is an effective option for many users. It includes counseling, behavioral therapy, and medications.

3. **Reverse heroin overdoses.** Naloxone is a safe and effective medication to use in opioid-related overdoses, including heroin and fentanyl. Naloxone is available under the brand names of Narcan and Evzio. It reverses the effects of opioids and is a critical medication in preventing fatal opioid overdoses.

People and their family members who are dealing with mental or substance use disorders, or both, can call the National Helpline at 1-800-662-4357. This is a confidential, free, 24-hour-a-day, 365-day-a-year, information service. It is available in English and Spanish. The National Helpline provides referrals to local treatment centers, support groups, and community-based organizations. Callers can also order free brochures and other information.