

MSA NEWSLINE

Up-to-date Information on Maternal Substance Abuse and Child Development



Lethal Consequences of Heroin Addiction



Some Facts about Heroin

- ◆ Heroin is the most abused and the most rapidly acting of the opiates.
- ◆ Heroin is processed from morphine.
- ◆ Most street heroin is "cut" with sugar, or starch, or possibly even strychnine or other poisons.
- ◆ Short-term effects of heroin can include a surge of pleasurable sensation, a warm flushing of the skin, dry mouth, a heavy feeling in the extremities, nausea, vomiting, and severe itching.
- ◆ One of the most detrimental long-term effects of heroin is addiction, which is a chronic relapsing disease.
- ◆ Other long-term effects are infectious disease,

Long-Term Heroine Addiction is Related to Higher Death Rate

Drs. Hser, Hoffman, Grella, and Anglin at the Drug Abuse Research Center of UCLA, conducted a study which consisted of 581 male subjects who were both heroin addicts and criminal offenders. These subjects were first recruited for the study between the years 1962 and 1964, from a substance rehabilitation program. The researchers were interested in investigating long-term physical and behavioral effects of heroin dependency.

In the year 1997, follow-ups were executed and the results were rather disturbing. According to the statistics, 49 percent of the original participants, 284 to be exact, were deceased. The 40 percent that were still living admitted to abusing heroin within the past 12 months, and less than 10 percent of the original participants were currently seeking methadone treatment.

When studying the death rates among men in the same age range, the heroin abusers' rate was 50 to 100 times more than the general population. Dr. Hser claims this is attributed to long-term addiction as well as other obvious consequences such as physical problems, high arrest rates, government assistance, and defiant behavior. When examining the causes of death, researchers found that the most common cause was drug overdose, which made up 21.6 percent; 19.5 percent died from a combination of homicide, suicide, or accidental death. Other causes included liver disease, accounting for 15.2 percent, cancer at 11.7 percent, and cardiovascular disease at 11.7 percent as well.

Interviews conducted in 1996 and 1997 concluded that 135 (55.8-percent) participants of the 242 that survived had abstained from using. Fifty (20.7-percent) were current users, and 23 (9.5-percent) refused urinalysis testing. Thirty-four participants were in jail during the interviewing session.

Dr. Hser reports that in any given year while the study was being conducted, approximately 10 percent of the participants were in treatment. Some were able to

collapsed veins, bacterial infections, abscesses, infection of heart lining and valves, arthritis, and other rheumatologic problems.

- ♦ Withdrawal symptoms for heroin may include restlessness, muscle and bone pain, insomnia, diarrhea, vomiting, cold flashes with goose bumps, and leg movements.
- ♦ Treatments for heroin abuse and addiction can include detoxification, methadone programs, and behavioral therapies.

maintain abstinence, however, less than five percent achieved sobriety for a period of five years. Those who obtained sobriety for more than five years reported fewer health and legal problems, and the majority of them were employed.

The participants in this study were all recruited from a corrections facility; therefore, the possibility of a bias is evident. Despite the fact that the statistics may not accurately represent the general population, patterns exist. Many negative consequences, some lethal, result from chronic heroin use. Financial, legal, and medical problems are common among long-term users. In addition, the recovery rates for those who attempt treatment are very low. Heroin is a powerful drug to overcome and most addicts end up relapsing numerous times. Researchers will continue to focus attention on addictive diseases in the hope that more preventive measures and successful treatments will result.

(Hser, Y-I; Hoffman, V; Grella, C.E.; and Anglin, M.D. A 33-year follow-up of narcotics addicts. *Archives of General Psychiatry* 58(5):503-508,2001.)

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