

# Heroin Use and Methadone Treatment

A Library and Resource Center on Alcohol, Tobacco, Other Drugs, Mental Health and Wellness

## Heroin Addiction – How Widespread Is It?

According to the Office of National Drug Control Policy, there are over 810,000 heroin dependent individuals in the United States. Drug Enforcement Administration data indicate that heroin is increasingly available at purer levels throughout the nation. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA) 1998 *National Household Survey on Drug Abuse* shows that an estimated 81,000 persons used heroin for the first time in 1997. The rate of initiation from 1994 to 1997 was at the highest level since the early 1970s.

Between 1991 and 1998, emergency department episodes involving heroin increased over 100% from 35,900 to 77,650 (SAMHSA's 1998 Drug Abuse Warning Network Survey).

Heroin and other opiates were the leading illicit drugs responsible for treatment admissions in 1997. Opiates accounted for 16% of admissions, according to the Treatment Episode Data Set (TEDS). Of these admissions, 94% were for heroin. Most of these heroin admissions (83%) used heroin daily.

There has been an increasing trend in new heroin use since 1992. A large proportion of these recent, new users were smoking, snorting or sniffing heroin. Most of these new users were under the age 26 (SAMHSA/U.S. Department of Health and Human Services).

## Heroin Addiction – How Is It Treated?

A variety of effective treatments are available for heroin abuse and addiction:

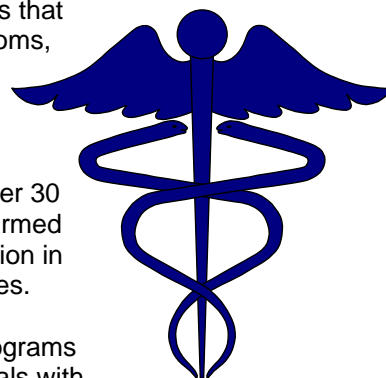
- ▶ Long or short-term residential treatment in a therapeutic community involving counseling in a highly structured environment.
- ▶ Outpatient programs emphasizing a range of behavioral counseling and psychotherapy.

- ▶ Self-help fellowships, such as Narcotics Anonymous, that utilize the "twelve step" approach to abstinence.
- ▶ Pharmacotherapy treatment that uses agonist medications such as methadone or LAAM to rebalance brain chemistry, block the effects of heroin and reduce craving.
- ▶ Use of opiate antagonists, such as naltrexone, to block the effects of opiate drugs. Often used to prevent relapse to opiate use in highly selective populations.
- ▶ The largest number of heroin/opiate addicts are treated effectively in methadone treatment programs.

## METHADONE TREATMENT

Methadone treatment provides the patient who is addicted to heroin with health, social and rehabilitation services that relieve withdrawal symptoms, reduce opiate craving and allow normalization of the body's functions. Methadone treatment has been available for over 30 years and has been confirmed effective for opiate addiction in numerous scientific studies.

Methadone treatment programs are staffed by professionals with extensive medical, clinical and administrative expertise. Patients receive medication from a health professional. Patients routinely meet with a primary counselor (social worker, caseworker or certified substance abuse counselor), attend clinic groups and access medical and social services.



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## Absence of Serious Adverse Effects

When taken as prescribed, long-term administration of methadone or LAAM causes no adverse effects to the heart, lungs, liver, kidneys, blood, bones, brain or other vital body organs. There can be some side effects such as constipation, water retention, drowsiness, skin rash, excessive sweating and reported changes in sexual drive. These may occur during the initial stages of treatment. These symptoms generally subside or disappear as methadone is adjusted and stabilized or when simple medical interventions are initiated. The myth that methadone is physically harmful has been shown to be scientifically unfounded.

## Absence of Medication Interactions

No serious interactions or absolute contraindications have been noted between methadone and other medications. Patients with conditions such as HIV/AIDS, hypertension, diabetes, pneumonia, cardiac conditions, cancers, psychiatric disorders, etc. may be treated effectively with routine regimens and medications. Coordination of methadone with certain other drugs is necessary. Dilantin for epilepsy and rifampin for tuberculosis increase the body's metabolism of methadone and thus prompt the need for methadone dosage increase.

## METHADONE TREATMENT TRUTHS

**Cost-Effectiveness:** Methadone treatment is an effective contributor to the reduction of the economic and social burdens linked to heroin abuse. Many methadone-maintained patients are able to secure and maintain gainful employment, remain heroin-free, improve health and reduce the risk of exposure to HIV/AIDS.

Methadone treatment has positive outcomes for the individual and for the community. It has been found to be highly cost-effective. The Institute of Medicine has concluded that "methadone maintenance pays for itself on the day it is delivered, and post treatment effects are an economic bonus."

**Reduction in Heroin Use:** Studies of methadone treatment have found dramatic declines in heroin use after admission to methadone treatment, and further declines as patients remain in treatment. Methadone treatment options need to be available on an ongoing basis to ensure treatment effectiveness.

**Reduction in Criminality:** Methadone treatment is associated with reduced criminal activity. Decreases in criminal behavior are greater the longer the person is in treatment.

**Reduction in Risk of HIV/AIDS:** The relationship between intravenous (IV) drug use, needle sharing and HIV/AIDS exposure is well documented. Methadone treatment has a pivotal role in reducing the spread of HIV/AIDS.

## RESOURCES

**American Methadone Treatment Association**  
(212) 566-5555 [www.assnmethworks.org](http://www.assnmethworks.org)

**CSAT National Helpline**  
1-800-662-HELP

**Drug Enforcement Administration-Office of Diversion Control/Liaison Unit**  
(202) 307-7292 [www.usdoj.gov/dea](http://www.usdoj.gov/dea)

**Food & Drug Administration-Narcotic Treatment Program Team**  
(301) 827-7264 [www.fda.gov](http://www.fda.gov)

**National Alliance of Methadone Advocates**  
(212) 595-6262 [www.methadone.org](http://www.methadone.org)

**National Clearinghouse for Drug & Alcohol Information**  
(800) 729-6686 [www.health.org](http://www.health.org)

**Narcotic Treatment Program Directory**  
[www.fda.gov/cder/compliance.ntpdir.pdf](http://www.fda.gov/cder/compliance.ntpdir.pdf)

**Substance Abuse & Mental Health Administration-Office of Pharmacologic & Alternative Therapies**  
(301) 443-7745 [www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov)

**Substance Abuse & Mental Health Administration-Substance Abuse Treatment Facility Locator**  
<http://findtreatment.samhsa.gov>



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