

UPDATE

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What You Need To Know About Heroin Part 1: Understanding The Epidemic

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Recent studies and surveys reflect a two year trend that, overall, today's teens are drinking and using drugs less. This encouraging information is affirmation for parents and professionals that they are doing a good job educating teens about the dangers of alcohol and drug overuse. Despite this, news stories about suburban teens overdosing on heroin have become far too commonplace. Understanding how this heroin epidemic has hit today's teens is the start of prevention and intervention.

Heroin, once thought to be a 'street' drug used and distributed in high-risk, lower socio-economic and urban areas, has been gaining popularity amongst a subset of suburban teens. Today, most teens are offered an education on the dangers of drugs, with supplemental resources readily available online for free. A lack of information cannot be the cause of this uprise in heroin use.

From a developmental perspective, teens are egocentric. They live life according to the "illusion of vulnerability," the idea that bad things can only happen to other people. This mindset provides a lucrative market for drug lords looking to exploit their devil-may-care attitude. The heroin is even packaged to appeal to teen buyers, using designer stamps such as Tiffany and Cartier.

Most teens don't wake up one day and decide to become addicted to heroin, but the road to dependence is a well-worn path. To overcome boredom, or even to self-medicate, teens start off using drugs for recreation. A large majority of heroin users start out by smoking pot and/or using

prescription painkillers.

The average teen trying heroin for the first time will smoke or snort it. This can mislead teens to believe it is not addictive. They fail to realize most addicts only start taking the drug intravenously after they have built up immunity to it and are looking for a quicker way to get high. Even armed with this knowledge, many teens still believe they are exempt from the addictive influence of heroin. They reason that if they only try it once, it will be okay, and they underestimate the level of euphoria heroin evokes in its user. It is reported that this feeling is so pleasurable, few people are content to try it just once. This is why thrill-seeking teens are especially vulnerable.

The rapid response to what is being deemed a "heroin crisis in the suburbs," includes the mass training of personnel in a host of emergency and law enforcement agencies across the country. For example, in the state of New York, more than 100,000 community members and public safety officials have been trained to recognize opioid overdoses, and to respond by administering Naloxone and calling 911. Naloxone (Narcan®) is a medication that reverses an opioid overdose. It cannot be used to get high, is not addictive, and is now available over the counter in many states. Availability continues to rise as more and more municipalities and state legislators acknowledge that opioid overdoses are an increasing problem, especially in today's teens and young adults.

Understanding how hard the heroin epidemic has hit today's teen is an important start to prevention and intervention plans.

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