

Contaminated Heroin: a Serious Danger How Parents Can Protect and Help Their Teens

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Introduction

The death of actor Philip Seymour Hoffman and the unexpected deaths of several Long Island teens as a result of heroin have been met with deep grief and sadness by many. Heroin, is available and successful, talented individuals and teens in affluent suburban communities, on Long Island, can be at risk. This frightening reality poses challenges for parents. This article will help you learn about heroin, contaminated heroin, and how to better protect your teens from these dangers. Educating teens and knowing when treatment is needed, is crucial to their development and their safety.

In 2010, the new influx of heroin was believed to be connected to the availability of higher “purity” heroin (which was more suitable to inhale) and to decreases in prices, making it more obtainable by teens. Many teens don’t understand that all routes of administration (inhaling, smoking, and sniffing/snorting) were highly addictive. Purchasing of substances on the streets is dangerous. Accidental over doses and even fatalities have occurred. Young people have no idea what and how much they are administering. Contaminated heroin is available and is being sold as pure heroin making the risk of over dose higher.

Contaminated Heroin: Fentanyl

Mixing heroine with fentanyl is nothing new. Its’ history can easily be traced back to the late sixties and seventies, a time of many overdoses by many young people, including famous musicians and celebrities (i.e. Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison, etc.). In 2005

and 2006 there was an outbreak of contaminated heroin and over 1000 people lost their lives nationwide.

The Nassau County Medical Examiner's office recently reported that several deaths that were initially thought to be heroin overdoses, were in fact caused by a combination of heroin contaminated with the potent narcotic fentanyl. This does not mean that we have an "outbreak"; however, it does mean we need to educate our children, before there is an outbreak.

In Nassau County and New York City, heroin contaminated with fentanyl has been sold in small clear cellophane packets labeled "24K", "Bud Ice", and "Thera-Flu". It's very important to note, however, that *all* heroine packets, whether labeled or not, can contain fentanyl. All packets can, in fact, contain anything and therefore can be highly dangerous.

What is Fentanyl and Why is it so Dangerous?

Fentanyl is believed to be *50 to 100xs more potent* than morphine (the active ingredient in heroin). It is a potent, synthetic, opioid analgesic with rapid onset and short duration of action. Clinically, it's been used as an anesthetic and to treat and control pain. Due to its high potency, it's very easy to ingest too much, leading to accidental overdose.

Fentanyl has also been abused with minor tranquilizers like benzodiazepine (Xanax) and with oxycodone. This is also a highly dangerous combination.

As an aside, the abuse of benzodiazepine in combination with oxycodone has been linked to increased incidence of accidental drug overdose. These drugs, which are often prescribed together to manage pain and anxiety; have also led to fatalities, particularly in young women.

What is Metamizole?

Metamizole has also been found in street heroine. It's an analgesic pain reliever and fever reducer that was widely used from the late 1920s until the 1970s when it was banned in the United States. It causes suppression of the immune system in small numbers of people. In some, this can be fatal due to infection.

What is Heroin?

Heroin is extracted from the seed pod of certain poppy plants. It is a processed form of morphine and is sold as a white powder, a brown powder, or a black sticky substance often called "black tar". One of the many dangers of "street heroin" (heroin sold on the street) is that it is often "cut" (mixed) with other substances. Heroin confiscated by authorities has been found to contain starch, sugar, powdered milk, and quinine. Sometimes, confiscated heroin has also contained strychnine and other poisons. Heroine can also contain fentanyl making the risk of over dose very high. Educating teenagers to the seriousness of these dangers is enormously important and necessary, particularly at this time.

Other Related Health Concerns

Heroin abuse, like other substance abuse, is a progressive disease process. In teenagers it often begins as "recreational" use, increases slowly, and eventually leads to daily use and loss of control. Loss of control signals that a psychological and physical disease process is active. Loss of control also signals that the disease has moved from one of substance abuse to addiction. It's important to remember that it's a disease and like all other diseases, it needs professional treatment.

Addiction to heroin puts teenagers at much higher risk for infection to HIV, Hepatitis C (HCV), and Hepatitis B. It interferes with judgment, particularly when they are under the

influence of the drug. This can lead to unprotected sex and the greater likelihood that the substance abusing partner is HIV positive or HCV positive. It can also result in unplanned pregnancy and/or an increased risk of sexual assault.

Other possible consequences from pro-longed use include bacterial infections of the blood vessels and heart valves, abscesses, infections of soft tissue, liver or kidney disease, scarred/collapsed veins, and pneumonia and/or tuberculosis. Educating teenagers to these consequences is most important.

Addiction to Heroin

Adolescence is a time of exploration and experimentation making many teens particularly susceptible to experimentation with heroin if available in their social circles. Unlike adults who begin their addictions to avoid and/or cope with problems, adolescents frequently begin theirs with innocent experimentation thereby making education all the more important. Because heroin is so highly addictive its' use can easily "derail" teens from a healthy life course and interrupt their emotional and psychological growth and progress and their academic success. One of the most detrimental consequences is the addiction itself. Additionally, heroin that's contaminated can lead to brain damage, other physical damage and death, as we saw with the tragic loss of Philip Seymour Hoffman. It can lead to accidental overdose.

Addiction to heroin causes drug seeking which is compulsive behavior. Molecular changes and neurochemical changes in the brain and physical dependence (as evidenced by increased tolerance to the drug) also happen. Behavior changes become obvious to parents but also confusing. Often, parents never suspect that the changes are a result of a growing

dependence on this lethal drug. As the teenagers' body steadily adjusts to the presence of the drug, withdrawal symptoms begin to occur if use is reduced.

Symptoms of withdrawal that parents can notice are restlessness, complaints of muscle and joint pain, insomnia, bouts of stomach upset that include vomiting and diarrhea, goose bumps on the skin and complaining of feeling cold, and involuntary leg movements.

What Parents Can Do

- Read and share this article with your teenager.
- Be alert to the above mentioned symptoms of withdrawal.
- If your child appears impaired do not assume s/he has consumed alcohol alone.
- Notice changes in your child's patterns of behavior.
- Notice if s/he is associating with a different crowd.
- Secretiveness is often present.
- Refusing to bring new friends home to meet you is common.
- Notice unexplained periods away from home without legitimate explanation regarding their whereabouts.
- Drop in school performance.
- Cutting school.
- School or other officials reporting to you that your child has publicly misbehaved.
- Arrest or official reprimand for unruly behavior and/or public intoxication.

Recognizing Symptoms of an Over Dose

Parents must be realistic recognizing that heroin (including contaminated heroin) is available to many kids. If you notice symptoms, don't assume that it's

alcohol intoxication. Parents whose children have suffered over doses, have often expressed that they thought their teenager was drunk and that it never occurred to them that they were using heroin.

Parents should immediately call 911 and get medical attention for their teen if they notice any of the following:

- Intoxication – regardless of what the child says is causing it.
- Slowed or labored breathing.
- Falling asleep or “nodding out”.
- Being difficult to wake up or not waking up if you attempt to awaken them.
- Muscle spasm of any kind.
- Pupils that look small or like “pin points”.
- Discolored nails or lips that appear blue or different.

Teach your children to recognize the above symptoms in other teens and let them know it’s OK to immediately call for help. Many teenagers hesitate to call immediately for fear that they will be in trouble either with parents or with the police. Saving a life, is most important in these circumstances. Teach your teenager to call for help if any of their friends has any of the above symptoms.

Many teenagers and parents have saved lives. NY State passed the “911 Good Samaritan Law” to protect those who intervene and seek emergency care for a friend, family member, or loved one who is suffering an overdose. This law protects the person who calls and who seeks help.

Treatment is Available and Crucial

If your child is experimenting with heroin or any other substance, it's vital that you know as soon as possible and that you seek professional help for your child and for your entire family. *Family education and family involvement are pivotal for successful treatment.*

All addictions exist in a context. A professional can quickly guide parents in re-evaluating and changing family dynamics making the presence of substance abuse harder for the teen to maintain. Treatment is available out-patient and/or inpatient depending on the needs of your teen and family and the level of care that's appropriate. Therapy, detoxification, and psycho-tropic medications are available to effectively assist in a full recovery from heroin or other substances. Always remember that addiction is a disease and needs treatment like all other diseases. It is *not* a moral failing and it is *not* simple poor judgment. The person is ill and needs help.

Getting Help - Call COPAY today at 516.466.2509

COPAY has successfully provided substance abuse treatment and education to adolescents, adults, and families for more than 30 years. If you suspect drug abuse or alcohol abuse in your teen, call COPAY today at **516-466-2509**. Schedule an appointment with one of our experienced professionals and discuss your concerns.

COPAY offers a **Parent/Teen Screening Service** whereby you contract for two sessions with a professional to explore your concerns with your child. A urine toxicology test is completed that will provide clear answers. You will know if your teen and family would benefit from treatment. This simple professional service saves lives.

COPAY also provides a **12 week Educational Series for Families and Teenagers**. Here, you and your child will learn about substance abuse and the family. You will also learn about addiction in the context of the family and how families can change making it

harder for the addiction to continue. This promotes positive change. COPAY offers a **Support Group for Parents of Teens Abusing Drugs and Alcohol**. This is a wonderful therapeutic tool that enhances full recovery.

Treatment for co-existing mental health issues (i.e. anxiety, depression, relationship concerns, etc.) is available. All calls to COPAY are strictly confidential.

Call COPAY today at 516-466-2509. We are here to assist you and your teen.

COPAY is proud to be supported by the Great Neck UCF, Greentree Foundation, United Way of LI, Hispanic Federation, LI Fund for Women and Girls, March of Dimes, GNMCCCP, Levitt Foundation, The Horace and Amy Hagedorn Fund at LICF, Act for Youth, Manhasset Community Fund, and the National Tennis Association, NCDMHCDDD, NYS, OASAS, NC Youth Board. COPAY is a member of NAFAS, a network of professional providers of substance/alcohol abuse services. We can refer you to the clinic in closest proximity to where you live. All calls are strictly confidential.