What are the risks of taking heroin?

Taking heroin involves a number of risks. Here’s what it could do to you:

- Overdoses can lead to coma and even death – as it can cause respiratory failure (this is what it’s called when your breathing stops).

- If you have been taking heroin regularly you may have built some tolerance, but if you then stop heroin for just for a few days, your tolerance will rapidly drop – and you risk an overdose if you simply take the high dose you previously took.

- If heroin is taken with other drugs, including alcohol, an overdose is more likely. Other downers (such as benzodiazepine tranquillisers or methadone), are also linked with deaths from heroin overdose.

- There’s also a risk of death due to inhaling vomit – because heroin both sedates you and stops you coughing properly – and the vomit remains in the airways so you can’t breathe.

- Injecting heroin can do nasty damage to your veins and arteries, and has been known to lead to gangrene (death of body tissue, usually a finger, toe or a limb) and to infections.

- The risks of sharing needles, syringes and other equipment involved in injecting are well-known – it puts you, and others, in danger of serious infections like hepatitis B, hepatitis C and HIV/AIDS.

What is heroin cut with?

It’s common for heroin to be mixed with a variety of substances, such as sugar, starch, powdered milk, quinine or paracetamol – this increases its weight and the drug dealer’s profits.

Other substances are also sometimes added to heroin, including sedatives such as benzodiazepines and barbiturates.

Substances like nutmeg, brick dust, and even ground-up gravel have also been reported on occasions.