What is heroin?

Heroin is an extract of opium. Opium is the dried 'milk' of the opium poppy Papaver somniferum, and it contains the two strong narcotic painkillers, or opiate analgesics, morphine and codeine.

Heroin - or diamorphine, to give it its scientific name - doesn't occur naturally in opium but can be made from morphine. (It is said to be semi-synthetic - there are also a number of completely synthetic opioid analgesics that may be misused, such as oxycodone.)

The German Bayer Company was the first to develop heroin in 1898, but soon realised it had very significant undesirable side effects. However, it continues to be used as a painkiller in hospitals for very severe acute pain such as in a heart attack, when side effects can be carefully monitored.

Heroin is the most commonly abused opiate. It's difficult to know how many people are addicted to it as the Home Office addicts index closed in 1997, leaving only the informal non-identifiable regional drug misuse databases. At that time, there were 40 000 notifiable opiate addicts. It's thought that numbers may have risen significantly since then, although only one per cent of the overall population are currently estimated to be heroin users.

Heroin can be taken in many different ways. Heroin bought on the street comes as a brown or off-white powder (heroin, or diamorphine, for medical use comes as ampoules containing a liquid for injection). This powder can be dissolved in water and injected, or snorted through the nose. It can also be smoked. This involves heating the drug on tin foil. The fumes are then inhaled through a small tube - a method sometimes called 'chasing the dragon'. Injecting creates a more powerful high.

The vast majority of heroin is illegally manufactured and is diluted or 'cut' for sale on the street. This is usually done by mixing it with glucose, but caffeine, flour, chalk, quinine and even talcum powder are used.

Heroin is also known by the slang terms smack, gear, skag or brown. It's a Class A illegal substance, with severe penalties for possession or supply.