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What are opiates?

Opiates are derived from the dried milk of the opium poppy. Synthetic opiates are called opioids. Heroin is the most commonly used opioid. Methadone, which is used as a substitute drug in the treatment of heroin addiction, is also an opioid. Most street heroin in Ireland comes from the countries of North West Asia, mainly Afghanistan and Pakistan.

In common usage, the term 'opiate' tends to be understood as referring to *all* opiate/opioid drugs. To keep things simple, this Factsheet uses the term 'opiate' in this way.

What do opiates do?

Opiates are sedative drugs that depress the nervous system. They induce feelings of relaxation and detachment in the user. The more often the drug is used the greater the quantity needed to produce the desired effect. Physical dependence often results from regular use and withdrawal can be very unpleasant. Opiates can be smoked, snorted or prepared for injection. Overdosing on an opiate can be fatal.¹

How do we know how many people use opiates in Ireland?

Surveys of random samples of the population can be used to estimate the total number of people who use specific drugs. However, opiate users are under-represented in population-based surveys, which are not designed to include people who do not normally live in private households (such as the homeless, hostel dwellers or prisoners).

Researchers in Ireland use a number of sources of information to estimate the number of opiate users in the population. These include:

- The Central Treatment List (CTL), which is a register of the number of people who are receiving methadone or another opioid as a substitute drug treatment.
- The Hospital In-Patient Enquiry (HIPE) scheme, which records details of people discharged from hospital, including their diagnosis.
- The Garda information systems, which record details of drug-related crime.

How many people use opiates in Ireland?

There have been attempts in recent years to estimate the number of problem opiate users in Ireland using these overlapping sources. The first study estimated that 14,158 people were using heroin in 2001, a rate of 5.6 per 1,000 of the population. In 2006 the estimate was 20,790, a rate of 7.2 per 1,000.² There are about 1.3 million opiate users in Europe.³

How many people receive treatment for opiate use?

The number of people receiving opioid substitution treatment and registered on the [Central Treatment List](#) increased from 3,681 in 1998 to 9,640 in 2013.⁶

The [National Drug Treatment Reporting System](#) (NDTRS) provides data on treated drug and alcohol misuse in Ireland.^a A total of 15,808 cases were treated for problem drug or alcohol use in 2013, of whom 4,189 reported an opiate as their main problem drug.⁵

Of the 4,189 cases who reported an opiate as their main problem drug:

- 931 were new cases.
- 2,100 were resident in Dublin.
- 2,740 were men.
- 8 were under 18 years.
- 2,567 were aged 18–34
- 2,588 used opiates with other drugs.
- 1,895 used an opiate daily, 580 used it between two and six days per week, 311 used it once per week or less, and 1,101 had not used it in the last month.

How many people die from using opiates?

The [National Drug-Related Deaths Index](#) (NDRDI) is a database which records cases of death by drug and alcohol poisoning, and deaths among drug users and those who are alcohol dependent. 350 people died from poisoning in 2012. Opiate use is a factor in the majority of fatal overdoses. The number of deaths in which an opiate was implicated was 220 in 2012. Heroin was a factor in 65 poisoning deaths in 2011 down from 61 in 2012. Methadone was involved in one out of four poisoning deaths (n=86) in 2012 and in most of these deaths methadone was mixed with another drug.⁶

Non-fatal overdoses and drug-related emergencies

According to the [Hospital In-Patient Enquiry \(HIPE\)](#) scheme, 4,422 cases of non-fatal overdose were discharged from Irish hospitals in 2012. There were 563 positive findings for narcotic or hallucinogenic drugs in relation to these cases, of which 478 (85%) were for an opiate.⁴

What does the law say about opiates?

Heroin and other opiates are on the list of controlled drugs under the Misuse of Drugs Acts 1977 and 1984, and amending regulations. Under the legislation a person who has this controlled drug

^a The NDTRS contains information only on those who started treatment in a particular year (for the first time or returning to treatment). It does not include the number in continuous care.

in their possession is guilty of an offence. You can find more information about Irish drug laws, offences and penalties on the [Citizens Information Board website](#).

Seizures of opiates

Information on drugs and crime is published by the [Central Statistics Office](#) (CSO) and includes data on drug seizures made by Garda and Revenue Customs officers. The number of seizures of heroin fell from 766 in 2012 to 690 in 2013.⁴ There were 33 seizures of methadone in 2010, and 36 in 2011.

The [Forensic Science Laboratory](#) (FSL) report on drugs received from seizures made by Garda.⁷ In 2014 the FSL reported on 39,434 grams and 51 tablets of diamorphine (heroin). 2,823 grams and 116 tablets of opioids (other).

For more information on opiates please refer to the following sources:

1. [Drugscope](#) online encyclopaedia of drugs and their history, effects and the law.
2. Kelly A, Teljeur C and Carvalho M (2009). [Prevalence of opiate use in Ireland 2006: a 3-source capture-recapture study](#). Dublin: Stationery Office.
3. European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction (2014) [European drug report 2014: trends and developments](#). Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.
4. Health Research Board (2013) [2014 National Report \(2013 data\) to the EMCDDA by the Reitox National Focal Point. Ireland: new developments, trends](#). Dublin: Health Research Board.
5. [Treatment data](#) National Documentation Centre interactive tables.
6. Health Research Board (2014) [Drug-related deaths and deaths among drug users in Ireland: 2012 figures from the National Drug-Related Deaths Index](#). Dublin: Health Research Board.
7. An Garda Síochána. (2015) [An Garda Síochána: annual report 2014](#). An Garda Síochána, Dublin.

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Other Factsheets in this series:

[Cannabis: the Irish situation](#)

[Cocaine: the Irish situation](#)

[Sedatives and tranquillisers: the Irish situation](#)

National Documentation Centre on Drug Use – Find the evidence

NDC website: www.drugsandalcohol.ie

Repository of Irish research on alcohol drugs and tobacco

- Reports, journal articles, theses and other research outputs
- Current research projects
- News service and reports of Dáil debates

Key resources

- Fact sheets – data on drugs and alcohol
- Interactive tables of drug treatment data
- Evidence-based reviews and guidelines
- Online directory of drug and alcohol courses

Research library

- Books, reports, scholarly publications and grey literature
- Scientific journals
- Bibliographic databases

Information services

- Document supply
- Query response
- Information literacy sessions
- Newsletter and tables of contents service

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