



“Dangerous heroin bug” - Advice to injecting drug users

Health Protection Agency
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- Between April 1st and August 1st 2000, over thirty heroin injectors died from a serious rare infection. Since June 2008, new cases have been identified and a further death.
- Doctors think that an infection in the muscle tissue of these drug users (caused by a bug called “Clostridium”) gets steadily worse over a few days. Eventually the bacteria in the muscle release enough toxin into the bloodstream to cause a very severe illness which often leads to rapid death.
- The drug users affected have usually injected heroin into a muscle or under the skin (skin-popping) and have had swelling, redness, and pain where they injected themselves.
- It is not certain whether only one batch of heroin is responsible for the recent cases, or if many supplies of heroin might have been affected.
- This infection can only be caught by injecting. It can’t be caught by having sex with or living with a drug user who has the infection.

To reduce your risk of getting this infection, please remember:

- There is no way that you can tell if your heroin is likely to cause this infection.
- Smoke heroin instead of injecting it – as this avoids the risk completely.
- If you must inject, do not inject into muscle or under the skin: make sure you hit the vein - your blood is better at killing bacteria than your muscle.
- Don’t share needles, syringes, cookers/spoons or other ‘works’ with other drug users.
- Use as little citric acid as possible to dissolve the heroin. A lot of citric acid can damage the muscle or the body under the skin, and this damage gives bacteria a better chance to grow.
- If you inject more than one type of drug, inject each drug at a separate place on your body and with clean works for each injection. This is important because certain drugs (e.g. cocaine) could give bacteria in heroin a better chance to grow.
- If you get swelling, redness, or pain where you have injected yourself, or pus collects under the skin, you should **get a doctor to check it out immediately**, especially if the infection seems different to others you may have had in the past.