

## Opium <sup>[1]</sup>

Dear Alice,

What exactly is Opium, and what are the effects/dangers of smoking it?

### **Answer**

Dear Reader,

Opium use has a long history. While there are reports of it being used over 1,000 years ago to manage pain, it has also played a role in the current opioid epidemic as a precursor to heroin and other opioids. Opium is a plant product derived from the sap inside of the opium poppy's seedpod. This poppy (*papaver somniferum*) grows in dry, warm climates, especially in the mountains stretching from Turkey through Central and South Asia all the way to Laos. There's been an increase in the quantity of opium being grown in South America, as well. The effects of smoking opium are almost identical to the effects of using heroin or morphine. They include a relaxed feeling, relief from pain and anxiety, decreased alertness, respiratory depression (slowed breathing), impaired coordination, constricted pupils, nausea, and constipation — these effects can last from three to six hours. With repeated use, it can become addictive. Additionally, overdose can result in effects such as coma or even death. For more on this potentially problematic poppy, pop on to the rest of the response.

The sap of the poppy, which is milky and opaque inside of the pod, thickens and darkens as it seeps out, after the pod has been sliced open by harvesters. This thick sap is then collected in bricks or balls and entered into the black market. Opium, in this raw form, may be smoked or taken orally, but not injected, since it's still full of fungi and bacteria. The opium may be further processed and purified to become a range of drugs, legal and illegal, including morphine, heroin, codeine, and thebaine. Certain byproducts of opium, such as morphine and codeine, are metabolized in the liver, and frequent use can lead to liver poisoning.

The human brain already has receptors for the opiate drugs because their chemical structures are quite similar to the endorphins the brain produces itself. Sometimes called "feel-good chemicals," endorphins are released when people experience pain or stress, flooding the space between neurons, and reducing the experience of pain. Opiates work similarly, creating a euphoric feeling and lessening pain.

Over a period of prolonged usage, an individual can become dependent on opium. This happens because the brain adapts its circuitry to the continued presence of the drug. The user also develops tolerance, resulting in continuously larger doses being needed to provide the same effects. If the drug use is then stopped, the receptors on neurons aren't sufficiently stimulated by neurotransmitters being released, and a chemical imbalance results. This turns into withdrawal, which can begin eight to twelve hours after the last use. Some of these symptoms may include tears in the eyes and flu-like effects, such as nausea, cramps, fever, weakness, depression, and diarrhea. Muscle spasms and feelings of anxiety may then develop. The entire process usually lasts seven to ten days. There's a high risk of overdosing on opium or opium products — which can include slow, shallow breathing, clammy skin, a rapid pulse, circulatory collapse, and convulsions. In the worst cases, coma and even death may result from respiratory failure.

It's great that you're asking these questions to learn more about this drug. While some may enjoy the high, it's also key to be aware of its addictive properties and the effects it may have on the body. For more information about opiates in general, check out the [National Institute on Drug Abuse](#) [2] and the related Q&As.

Alice!

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[Alcohol & Other Drugs](#) [3]

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[Opioids](#) [5]

## Related questions

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[Heroin addictive?](#) [7]

[Codeine effects and side effects](#) [8]

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- [1] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/opium-1>
- [2] <http://www.drugabuse.gov/>
- [3] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/alcohol-other-drugs>
- [4] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/sedatives-tranquillizers-other-depressants>
- [5] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/opioids>
- [6] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/hungry-heroin-information-0>
- [7] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/heroin-addictive-0>
- [8] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/codeine-effects-and-side-effects-0>
- [9] <https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/answered-questions/oxycontin-what-do-you-know>