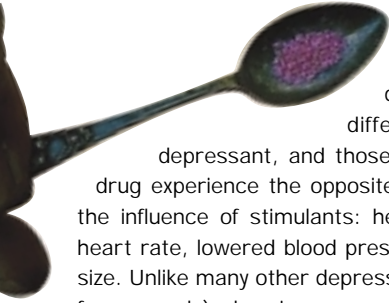


## VI.B. Recognising the heroin user



Typically, heroin users are pale, thin, and unhealthy looking, but different users react differently. Heroin is a depressant, and those under the influence of the drug experience the opposite symptoms of those under the influence of stimulants: heroin users show a slowed heart rate, lowered blood pressure, and reduction in pupil size. Unlike many other depressants (such as barbiturates, for example), heroin users are able to function fairly normally while under the influence of the drug, although they may appear sedated and detached. The head may bob and while the suspect appears to be falling asleep, he may remain mentally alert. Thus, 'nodding' suspects may still pose an escape risk.

When not immediately under the influence, heroin users tend to itch and scratch a lot, and crave sweets. Chronic users withdrawing from the drug become extremely anxious, experiencing sweating, chills, convulsions, and diarrhoea. While withdrawal is not ordinarily life threatening, the stress it causes can trigger latent health problems, and those affected should receive medical attention.

An overdose victim will have erratic or scarcely detectable breathing and pulse, extremely small pupils, low body temperature, and may show blueing around the lips and nail beds. This condition is life-threatening, and requires urgent medical attention. If conscious, every effort should be made to keep the subject awake, but cold showers should be avoided due to the risk of inhaling water. If unconscious, the airway should be cleared (but nothing left in the mouth) and the subject placed in the recovery position (on one side so that vomit is not inhaled). If the respiration or heartbeat stops, CPR should be administered.

Urine testing for heroin use is often inaccurate, because many legally prescribed medications can produce positive results for opiates, and this means relying on self-reporting to confirm whether other medication has been taken. Of those who tested positive and admitted using heroin in the 3 Metros study, all were white.