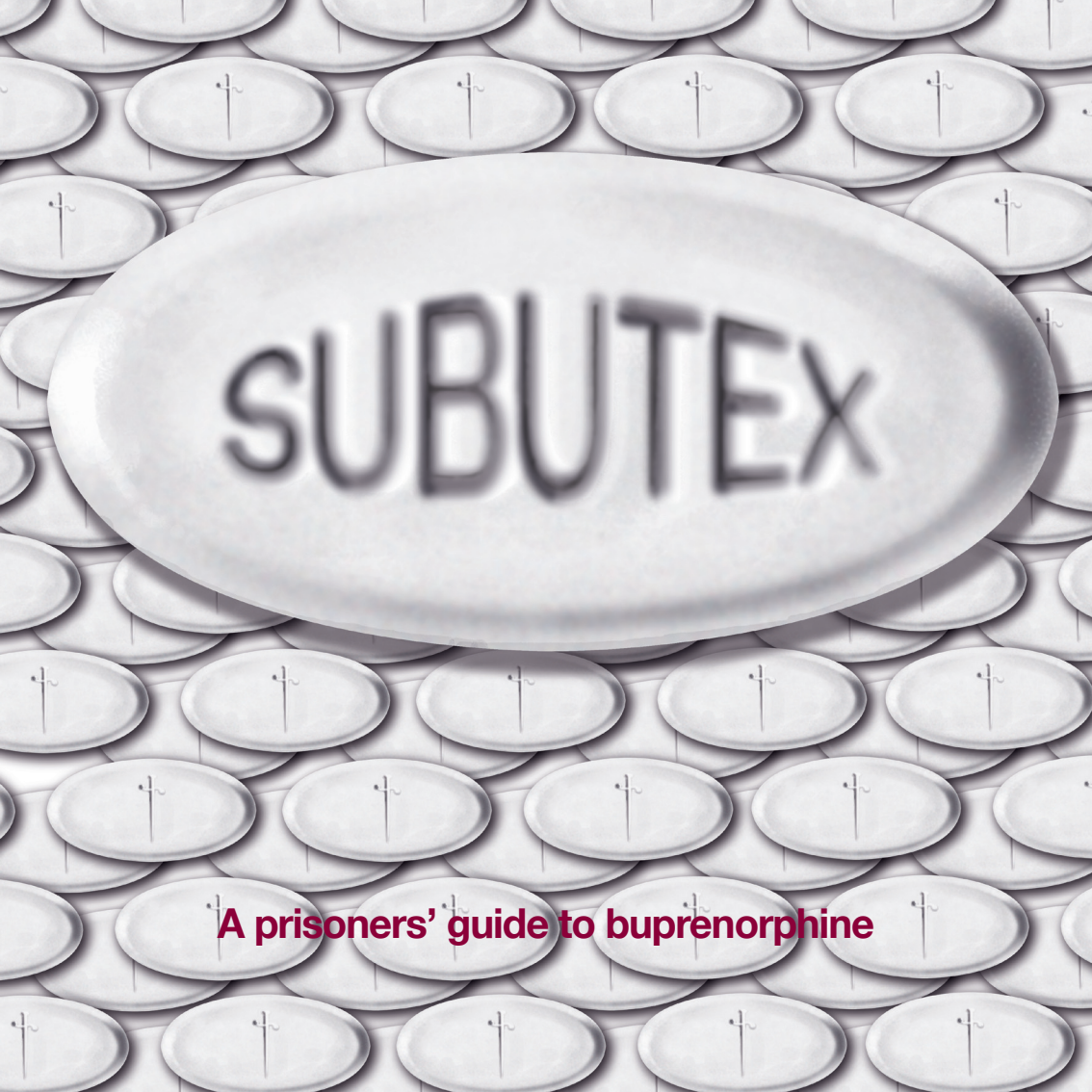




SUBUTEX

**A prisoners' guide to buprenorphine**



# The Opium poppy

In the land of far, far away the opium poppy grows. The seed pods of this poppy are scratched until they drip with a sticky resin called opium. Raw opium contains a number of natural drugs:

**Morphine -**

which is turned into diamorphine (heroin)

**Codeine -**

which is turned into dihydrocodeine (DF118s)

**Thebaine -**

which is turned into buprenorphine (Temgesic, Subutex) and naloxone.

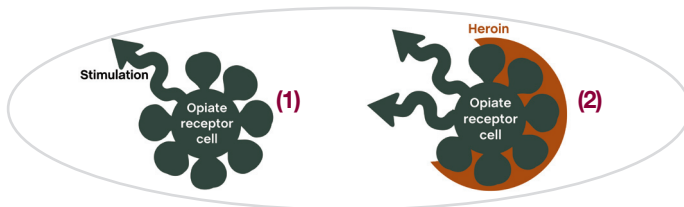
Buprenorphine usually comes in the form of a pill. One brand of pill contains a lower dose of buprenorphine and is prescribed by doctors for pain relief - this is called **Temgesic**. Another brand of pill contains buprenorphine in a range of doses and is used for the treatment of heroin addiction - this pill is called **Subutex**. There is also a new pill called **Suboxone**, which contains buprenorphine and naloxone.

# Opiate agonists

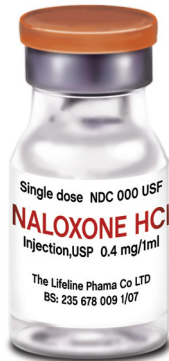


Your body produces its own form of natural morphine (called endorphins). It does this by stimulating **opiate receptor cells** in your brain **(1)**.

When an opiate drug like heroin or a methadone is used, it sticks to these cells and stimulates them at the same time **(2)**, leading to mental effects like euphoria (pleasure) and analgesia (pain reduction) and physical effects such as slower breathing and heart rate. Drugs like heroin and methadone are called **opiate agonists**.

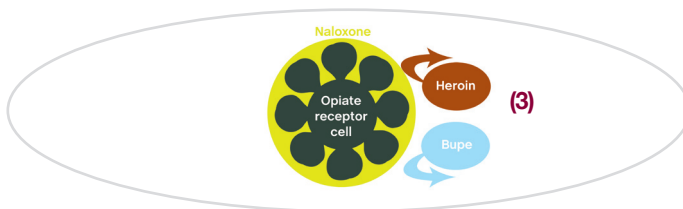


# Opiate antagonists



The drug naloxone is an **opiate antagonist**. Naloxone is used by doctors and paramedics to counteract the effects of heroin overdose\*. If you're using heroin and then injected naloxone, the naloxone would kick the heroin off the receptor cells and send you into rapid withdrawal.

Naloxone sticks to your opiate receptor cells, preventing heroin or other opiates like buprenorphine giving you a high, but does not stimulate these cells, so does not give you any sort of high or buzz (3).



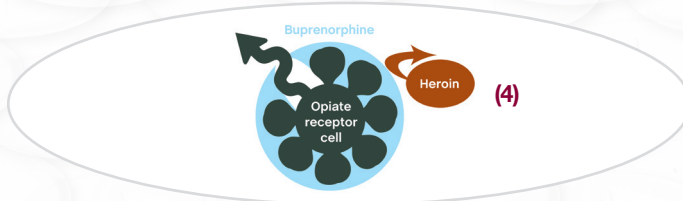
\*Naloxone is effective for about 45 minutes, which is why a longer acting opiate antagonist, naltrexone, is used as a treatment for heroin addiction.

## Subutex



Subutex contains the drug buprenorphine. Buprenorphine is a **mixed opioid agonist-antagonist**. This means that like naloxone, Subutex sticks to the opiate receptor cells and blocks the effect of heroin - but, unlike naloxone, it also partially stimulates the opiate receptors, so gives you a bit of a buzz (4).

Because Subutex prevents heroin from working, but still gives you a bit of a buzz, it has a number of uses as a treatment for addiction. It is used for short term detox, to help people withdraw from heroin or methadone; and in the longer term as a substitute for heroin as part of a maintenance programme. Some prisons are prescribing Subutex on release, and a trial of prescribing inside prison is due to start shortly.



## Suboxone



Suboxone has recently received a license to be used in Britain. Suboxone contains buprenorphine and naloxone. The naloxone has been added to the pill to make it harder to misuse.

Subutex and Suboxone are pills that are designed to be used 'sublingually' (absorbed under the tongue). If Suboxone is used sublingually, the buprenorphine in it will have the same effect as a Subutex pill, as naloxone has no effect when used in this way. Like Subutex, using Suboxone will send you into rapid withdrawal if you are a regular heroin user. If you are clear of heroin, and then inject Suboxone, the naloxone will kick in and may delay (until the naloxone wears off) or reduce any 'buzz' from the buprenorphine.

If Suboxone is sniffed, effects tend to be unpredictable and vary from person to person. The naloxone in Suboxone may delay the start of the effects or may even stop it working altogether in some people. Others will get high from sniffing Suboxone just like Subutex.

## Overdose and mixing drugs

Both Subutex and Suboxone pills have no effect if swallowed, chewed or smoked. The usual method of illicit use is to sniff the crushed up pills. To reduce damage to the inside of your nose, the pills should be crushed and chopped into the finest powder possible.

Subutex pills are white ovals which come in 0.4mg, 2mg and 8mg doses. Suboxone pills are white hexagons and also come in 2mg and 8mg doses. This means that an 8mg pill has four times the amount of buprenorphine in it and is four times stronger than a 2mg pill. Subutex is sometimes crushed and sold by the line. These lines may be cut with other drugs like paracetamol. An 8mg pill usually makes between 4 and 8 lines when crushed.

The amount you use is important. Although buprenorphine is thought to be safer than heroin, **you can still overdose and die if you take too much buprenorphine\***. Mixing certain drugs with buprenorphine is thought to give a better hit, but also greatly increases the chances of overdose. In particular, avoid drugs that slow breathing and the central nervous system or any medications that make you sleepy, such as benzodiazepines (like diazepam), anti psychotics (like olanzapine), GHB, opiates (like codeine or tramadol) as well as some HIV medicines. Drinking a lot of alcohol with buprenorphine is also risky.

**\*Injecting Subutex will greatly increase your chances of overdose. Heroin users should also remember that although you may have experience of using opioid drugs, your tolerance will have been greatly reduced while you are in prison, making overdose much more likely with buprenorphine or heroin.**

Liver problems, a drop in blood pressure and breathing difficulties are also listed as possible side effects of using Subutex and Suboxone.



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## Effects, withdrawals and addiction

People start using Subutex in prison for the 'hit' or 'buzz' or to give them a 'head change' (relief of boredom etc.). Subutex is also known to have anti-depressant properties.

If snorted Subutex starts working within 20 minutes or so. The main effects peak after a couple of hours but can go on for days. You can feel very relaxed (monged, wrecked, chilled out), or stimulated (buzzy, excitable, chatty) at different stages of the drug experience. Some users feel so stimulated that they can have trouble sleeping. Some people are sick when they first take Subutex (this can also happen if the powder slips down the nose and throat after snorting).

The effects of Subutex and Suboxone are similar to heroin (euphoria and analgesia) but milder. The risks are also similar to heroin - overdose (less likely than with heroin) and picking up a habit (addiction).

Some people use Subutex every now and again, while others become daily users. After several weeks of daily use, tolerance may develop (you need more to get the same effect). This can cause two main problems: debt, as a daily habit can cost £5 to £10 a day and withdrawal, when there is a drought in illicit supply or you can't afford it.

Subutex and Suboxone withdrawals are similar to those from heroin (but milder), i.e. low mood, trouble sleeping (insomnia), lack of appetite, sweats and shivers, nausea/vomiting, diarrhoea (the shits), stomach cramps etc. These withdrawals usually last 3 to 4 days.



## Dogs, drug testing and getting caught

Subutex has become very popular recently - in a number of jails it has become the number one drug of choice. The prison service are aware of this and are about to step up their response. At present sniffer dogs are being trained so they can detect buprenorphine and it is likely testing for it will become far more widespread.

The main drug test for buprenorphine is the urine test. It can also be identified in blood and hair in lab tests. As yet, there do not appear to be any saliva or sweat tests. By mid-2007, urine tests for buprenorphine were specialised only, this means that it is not listed as one of the drugs on available multi-drug urine tests (which generally test for between four and ten drugs).

Mandatory Drug Tests (MDTs) usually include Subutex in the range of drugs tested for, but Voluntary Drug Tests (VDTs) do not always do so. Most sources indicate that buprenorphine can be detected in urine between one to three days after use – the same as heroin, but shorter than for methadone (7 - 9 days). However, some drug testing companies claim buprenorphine is detectable in urine for 3 to 6 days.

Buprenorphine is a Class C drug under the Misuse of Drugs Act. It is illegal to possess it without a prescription. Positive tests for Subutex and possession cases are dealt with internally by governors – they do not go to outside adjudication and are therefore (at present) more likely to result in loss of privileges rather than extra days on your sentence.

## And finally

You get your kicks from heroin because it stimulates the opiate receptors in your brain. Heroin stops you feeling pain (physical and emotional) and gives you a high. As we all know, heroin has its drawbacks. It can kill you from an overdose if you take too much or if you start injecting you can become infected with viruses like HIV or hepatitis from sharing injecting equipment. But the reason so many heroin enthusiasts end up as guests of the Windsor chain of hotels is because heroin is so highly addictive. It often becomes a 24/7 365 days a year habit, that constantly needs feeding or you become physically ill and go into withdrawal.

A number of people manage to quit heroin by using Subutex and Suboxone. Some people come into prison with a heroin habit and leave with a Subutex habit, which is at least a step in the right direction. However, other people come into prison having never used anything more than a bit of weed and leave jail as Subutex addicts.

**A Subutex habit on the inside can easily turn into a heroin habit on the outside.**



## Summary



Heroin and buprenorphine are made from **opium**.

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Your body produces its own natural opiates by stimulating **opiate receptor cells** in your brain.

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**Subutex** contains buprenorphine in 8mg, 2mg and 0.4mg doses. **Buprenorphine** has (milder) heroin like effects and stops heroin from giving you a high, sending you into withdrawal if you are on heroin already.

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**Suboxone** is a new drug that contains buprenorphine in 8mg and 2mg doses and naloxone. The buprenorphine in **Suboxone** will stop heroin from working and if injected, the naloxone in it will delay or reduce the effects of heroin or buprenorphine. If Suboxone is sniffed the effects are unpredictable.

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If you use buprenorphine regularly, you will eventually become **addicted** - meaning that you will experience **tolerance** (needing bigger doses to keep getting the same effect) and opiate **withdrawals** when you stop (jangling, rattling).

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You can **overdose** and die from taking too much buprenorphine.

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Subutex pills are sold for around £40 each in prison, so using them can become **expensive**, leading you into debt or putting pressure on friends and relatives to give you money or to risk arrest by supplying you while you're inside.

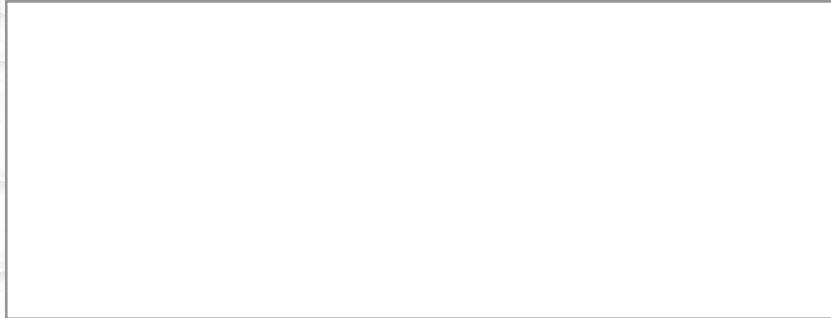
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The prison service are training **sniffer dogs** and are likely to increase the amount of **drug testing** for buprenorphine.

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# For help and advice contact



[ ] lifeline | publication guidelines

[>] aims  
To present the facts about illicit buprenorphine use in prison.

[>] audience  
People in prison (aged 18+ ) with an interest in drugs.

[v] content  
Explicit drug information.

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