

An Exploratory Study of Inhalers and Injectors Who Used Black Tar Heroin

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Aims. To undertake an exploratory study to examine the characteristics of patients in narcotic treatment programs who started their use of black tar heroin either as inhalers or as injectors and to compare them with those who started as inhalers but shifted to injecting. Other studies in this area have used subjects using other forms of heroin more amenable to inhaling.

Participants, Design, and Measurement. A purposive sample of 199 patients in 6 methadone programs in Texas were interviewed in 2002-2003 using a structured instrument.

Findings. At admission to treatment, those who were heroin inhalers were more likely to be African American, to live with their families, to have income from wages, and to report fewer days of problems on most of the ASI measures. Those who shifted from inhaling to injecting were more likely to be Hispanic and to have had mental health problems that interfered with their lives and to have had less nurturing while growing up. Injectors were older at this treatment admission, had more treatment episodes and more times in jail, and were more likely to have hepatitis C, AIDS, or gonorrhea. There were high levels of physical and mental problems and histories of traumatization as children and adults for almost all the respondents. Males were as likely as females to have been sexually abused as children or as adults.

Conclusions. The high rates of mental and physical problems among all the clients interviewed showed the need for comprehensive services to be delivered within the substance abuse treatment programs. Histories of trauma and sexual abuse should be addressed for both male and female clients.