

# Opium: A Brief History

Opium is a narcotic drug produced from the opium poppy plant, grown mostly in India and Turkey. The use of opium is believed to be dated as far back as the earliest civilizations. As long ago as 400 B.C., historical records show opium had been used as a medicine, taken with a beverage or swallowed as a solid. Alexander the Great even gave it to his sick and tired soldiers as a means of helping reduce their pain from traveling so far by foot.



Toward the middle of the 17th century, Europeans tried combining opium with smoking tobacco they had received from the America's, the result would be the creation of the worlds first ever "addictive drug." By inhaling opium rather than ingesting it orally, it allowed the chemical properties of the drug to hit the blood stream with much more potency. When opium smoking was introduced into China, the addiction problems set off 150 years of turmoil within the country. By the end of the 18th century opium addiction was so prevalent that the Chinese government was so desperate to end the sale of drug that it entered into a war with Great Britain because they were the one selling it to the Chinese.

At the same time opium made its way to North America, where it was used both to kill pain and to induce pleasure. This time instead of smoking opium, as was the preferred method in Asia, a European chemist Janos Kabay found way of isolating the most potent qualities of opium when he created morphine. Almost over night, morphine became a worldwide sensation. In America, morphine was used by doctors to relieve pain during surgery, common people as a way of getting relieving stress and mothers as a way of quieting their crying babies. Many traveling salesmen sold "elixirs" (miracle drugs) to people, claiming their tonics had healing powers for anything from aches and pains to alcohol addiction. It was even possible to buy these elixirs through mail order catalogs. What people didn't realize was that these elixirs all contained the same ingredient opium.



With the invention of the hypodermic syringe during the American Civil War, the injection of morphine became extremely valuable in treating patients who had to undergo amputation of limbs. Physicians of that time hoped that injecting morphine directly into the bloodstream would avoid the addictive effects of smoking or eating opium, but instead this form proved to be even more addictive.