A narcotic is a depressant that produces a stuporous state in the person who takes it. Narcotics, while often inducing a state of euphoria or feeling of extreme well being, are powerfully addictive. The body quickly builds a tolerance to narcotics, so that greater doses are required to achieve the same effect. Because of their addictive qualities, most countries have strict laws regarding the production and distribution of narcotics.

Historically, the term narcotic was used to refer to the drugs known as opiates. Opium, morphine, codeine, and heroin are the most important opiate alkaloids—compounds extracted from the milky latex contained in the unripe seedpods of the opium poppy. Opium, the first of the opiates to be widely used, was a common folk medicine for centuries, often leading to addiction for the user. The invention of the hypodermic needle during the mid-19th century allowed opiates to be delivered directly into the blood stream, thereby dramatically increasing their effect. By the late 20th century, the legal definition of a narcotic drug had been expanded to include such non-opiate addictive drugs as cocaine and cannabis.

Narcotic drugs decrease the user’s perception of pain and alter his or her reaction to pain. For this reason, narcotics—primarily codeine and morphine—are prescribed legitimately as pain killers. In a medical setting, they are referred to as narcotic analgesics. For pain relief, scientists have developed opioids, which are synthetic drugs with morphine-like properties. Some common synthetic opioids include meperidine (trade name Demerol) and methadone, a drug often used to treat heroin addiction. The use of methadone as a treatment for addiction is controversial, however, since methadone itself is addicting.

Scientists have attempted to develop ways to use the pain-killing properties of narcotics while counteracting their addictive qualities. Such investigations have led to the discovery of narcotic receptors in the brain, and of the body’s own natural pain-killing substances, called endorphins. Narcotics behave like endorphins and act on, or bind to, the receptors to produce their associated effects. Substances known as narcotic or opioid antagonists are drugs that block the actions of narcotics and are used to reverse the side effects of narcotic abuse or an overdose. A new class of drugs, a mixture of opioids and opioid antagonists, has been developed so that patients can be relieved of pain without the addictive or other unpleasant side effects associated with narcotics.

Narcotic drugs are among those substances used illegally, or abused, by adolescents. Some estimate that as many as 90% of adult drug addicts began a pattern of substance abuse during adolescence.

Further Reading


National Association of School Psychologists

Organization of school psychologists and related professionals, with members in the United States and 25 other countries.

The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) has over 21,000 members from the United States and abroad. Founded in 1969, NASP is dedicated to serving the mental health and educational needs of school age children and adolescents. Members are school psychologists or professionals in related fields. The association encourages professional development and provides publications, meetings, workshops, and seminars for its members, and maintains a resource library and a placement service for school psychologists. In addition, NASP plays an activist role on behalf of school-age children, issuing position statements and resolutions to its membership, the general public, and government officials at all levels on such issues as violence in media and toys; legislative priorities; advocacy for appropriate educational services for all children; corporal punishment; and racism, prejudice, and discrimination.

NASP operates a national certification program for school psychologists. In addition, NASP is approved by the American Psychological Association and the National Board of Certified Counselors to provide continuing education for psychologists and National Certified Counselors. This allows participants in NASP’s convention workshops and regional workshops to apply these sessions to their state’s requirements for renewal of professional licenses.

Further Reading
The National Institute of Mental Health conducts and supports research in a very broad array of areas of mental health and illness. The Institute also collects and analyzes a vast amount of scientific data, widely distributes those data and analyses, and provides technical assistance to numerous federal, state, local, and private agencies and organizations. The National Institute of Mental Health consists of nine principal divisions and offices, and oversees the administration of a hospital.

Natural selection
See Darwin, Charles

Nature-nurture controversy
Colloquial term for the two views of human development, one emphasizing heredity and the other environment.

The nature-nurture controversy is an age-old dispute among behavioral psychologists, philosophers, theologians, and theorists of consciousness as to the source of the creation of human personality: Does it develop primarily from biology (nature), or from the environments in which we are raised (nurture)? People have been pondering the role of nature and environments since the time of Hippocrates (c. 460-c. 377 B.C.). He, for instance, linked human behavior to four bodily fluids, or humors: yellow bile, blood, black bile, and phlegm. Hippocrates classified personalities into four types related to these four humors: choleric (yellow bile), or hot-tempered; sanguine (blood), or confident; melancholic (black bile), or moody; and phlegmatic, or slow to take action.

Unlike Hippocrates, the philosopher John Locke (1632-1704), whose ideas were a precursor to behaviorism, believed that behaviors were externally determined. Similarly, the philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) theorized that people were born essentially good, and that positive aspects of the environmental contribute to the development of behavior. Locke believed that people were born essentially blank, like a blackboard, and who they “became” was entirely the result of their experiences.

The first scientist of the modern era to seriously consider the genetic and environmental effects in personality development was Sir Francis Galton, a wealthy British scientist. Hedabbled in the arts and sciences but became primarily interested in what we today call genetics after his cousin, Charles Darwin, published The Origin of the Species in 1859. He was fascinated by the idea of genetic pre-programming and sought to uncover the ways in which humans are predestined. Many of his experiments were eccentric and ill-conceived, but his contributions to the field are still considered vital. His studies, curiously, led to the development of the science of fingerprinting and to the concept of the word association test. He also coined the term “eugenics” and believed that science would one day be able to direct, with absolute precision, the development patterns of human evolution. Taking the other position in this early debate was John Watson, the eminent behaviorist who once made the outlandish claim—which he later modified—that he could turn babies into any kind of specialist he wanted.

Over the years, much research has been done in the nature/nurture controversy, and today nearly everyone agrees that both nature and nurture play crucial roles in human development. This outlook has come to be known as interactionism and is the dominant system of belief among biologists, psychologists, and philosophers nearly everywhere.

Much of the research in the late 20th century has focused on twins who were separated at birth. In studying such pairs, psychologists can be relatively certain that any behavior the twins share has a genetic component, and those behaviors that are different have environmental causes. There are many famous cases of twins separated at birth being reunited later in life to find that they have many things in common. One of the most striking studies of twins, reported in a 1995 New Yorker article, was conducted by Thomas Bouchard, a professor of psychology at the University of Minnesota and founder of the Center for Twin and Adoptive Research. The twins, Daphne Goodship and Barbara Herbert, had been separated at birth and sent to economically different areas of London. The article’s author, Lawrence Wright writes, “When they finally met, at King’s Cross Station in May of 1979, each was wearing a beige dress and a brown velvet jacket. . . . Both had the eccentric habit of pushing up their noses, which they called ‘squidging.’”