

## **Kicking the Habit**

**Author:** [Sayed Yaqub Ibrahimi](#)

Using opium or hashish is considered perfectly acceptable by increasing numbers of people. After a long day of carpet weaving, Abdullah, 48, likes to relax with a nice cup of tea - and some opium.

“I have been eating opium for as long as I can remember,” said Abdullah, who lives in the northern province of Jowjan. “People say it is harmful, but it isn’t true. My father and grandfather ate opium. Everyone in our village does. They’ve been enjoying it for a very long time.”

While much of the world’s attention has focused on illegal narcotics being exported from the country, the spotlight has now been turned on Afghanistan’s internal drug problem.

According to a survey conducted by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, UNODC, and released in November, Afghanistan now has close to one million drug users, or 3.8 per cent of the population. This is roughly on par with its neighbours: the figure is a slightly higher than the percentage of drug users in Pakistan, but lower than in Iran, say experts in the area.

Out of 920,000 users, 740,000 are men. The UN report also estimates that 60,000 children under 15 also use drugs.

The substance of choice for the vast majority of these users is hashish, with approximately 520,000 people smoking or ingesting the drug. Another 150,000 use opium, while a much smaller number, estimated at 50,000, use the heroin, the refined derivative of opium. Of these, an estimated 7,000 inject the drug.

Jehanzeb Khan, international project coordinator for UNODC, says many of Afghanistan’s addicts were first introduced to drugs when they were living abroad as refugees. “I would say that 35 per cent of our male addicts and 25 per cent of our female addicts became addicted in Iran,” he said.

Large numbers of Afghans fled the wars and conflicts of the past three decades and sought refuge in neighbouring Iran and Pakistan. Now they are flooding home and, says Jehanzeb, bringing their drug habits with them.

Najibullah 38, a resident of central Logar province, admits he is an opium addict. He started smoking three years ago, when he was refugee in Iran. When he returned home, he found that his father was growing opium poppies.

“Instead of kicking the habit, I grew more addicted,” he said. “Now I have to smoke at least once a day. I have come to Kabul, so that no one in my family can see me when I smoke.”

But it would be difficult to blame the bulk of the drug problem on returning refugees, according to other medical professionals. Opium use, in particular, is traditional in Afghanistan, with the number of drug users disproportionately high in northern provinces such as Balkh, Jowjan and Kunduz.

According to Dr Mohammad Bashir, head of the drug treatment centre in Mazar-e-Sharif, some addicts quite literally get started at their mothers' knee.

"Eating opium is a tradition in the north, particularly the districts around the river Amu Darya," he said. "Women engaged in the carpet-weaving trade give their children opium to keep them quiet. It enters their bloodstream, and they become addicted."

Parents also use opium as a treatment for childhood coughs and colds.

Mohammad Khan, 32, a resident of the Kaldar district of Balkh province, says he has been addicted to opium since he was a child. He thinks that his mother must have given him the drug.

"I am dependent on opium. I can't work. I just lie half-dead in a corner when I use it," he said. "I have three children, and I don't want them to use opium. I want to get rid of this habit somehow."

Bashir said that in the six months since the drug treatment centre was established, approximately 100 addicts have been referred to him. Most, he says, ingest opium, with a smaller number of intravenous drug users.

"We are very concerned about those who inject drugs," he said. "They make up about 20 per cent of our patients."

Local people traditionally eat opium, he said. It is the returnees who are introducing intravenous use, and it is on the rise, particularly among young people.

"This has been a shock to us," he said. "It is much more difficult to treat those who inject drugs."

Bashir noted that using needles also brings the risk of HIV/AIDS, a growing concern in Afghanistan.

"We don't have modern equipment to test patients, so we don't know how many people in Balkh may be infected," he said.

Bashir says he sees very few patients who use hashish, probably because most do not think they need treatment. "Hashish addiction is not a matter of concern," he said.

Dr Mohammad Zafar, director of Drug Demand Reduction at the Counter-Narcotics Ministry, confirms that drug addiction is a problem.

"Cheap price and easy availability, along with the high level of unemployment, have paved the way for drug addiction," he said.

According to the survey, the average heroin addict spends 60 to 100 afghani per day (between 1.50 and 2 US dollars).

“Now that this survey has clarified the number of addicts, the Counter Narcotics Ministry must take action,” said Zafar.

Dr Abdullah Fahim, a spokesman for the public health ministry, said his ministry will work with foreign organisations to establish hospitals for addicts in those provinces where drug use is highest. At present there are only two hospitals that provide such treatment, one in Kabul and one in Herat. But according to Dr Fahim, the ministry intends to establish another 150-bed hospital in Kabul, and six 50-bed hospitals in other high-risk provinces.

The ministry will also launch a campaign to discourage drug use.

But first, they’ll need to convince some people that drug use is a problem.

Nasrullah, a soldier in Balkh, says he has been using opium for 10 years.

“I am not sick, so why should I go for treatment?” he said. “I use narcotics because I want to. I don’t want to stop. I have no trouble affording it, and it’s easy to find,” he said.

Others, however, acknowledge that drug addiction has ruined their lives and are looking for help.

Sayed Rahman, 29, is a day labourer who lives in a dirty mud hut on the outskirts of Kabul with four other men, all of them opium addicts. Rahman lies on a mattress amidst unwashed dishes and assorted clutter, too lethargic to move.

“My relatives do not want to see me now,” he said. “When I make money, I spend half of it on opium. I don’t know what to do to get rid of this habit. My life is ruined.”

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