

Educate Yourself

FACTS about DRUGS: METHAMPHETAMINE

WHAT IS IT?

Methamphetamine is an illegal stimulant in the amphetamine family, which also includes drugs commonly available by prescription, such as Ritalin, Adderall, and Dexedrine.

There are a variety of forms of methamphetamine. "Speed" typically refers to methamphetamine salt (HCl powder), which is typically a white or off-white powder. "Crystal" refers to the freebase form of the drug, which appears as crystal chunks resembling shards of glass. "Ice" is a higher-grade form of crystal meth that has undergone a chemical process making the end product look like glass (Roberts 1995).

SLANG

Speed, meth, crank, crystal, glass, ice, chalk, Tina.

AVAILABILITY & USE

Due to a booming illegal manufacturing industry, methamphetamine has become increasingly available throughout much of the United States. Use is highest in Hawaii, and metropolitan areas of the western United States where methamphetamine use has been popular for many years. Recently, its use has spread to other areas, including the East Coast.

Methamphetamine can be swallowed, snorted, smoked and injected by users. Due to its "speedy" and long lasting effects, methamphetamine has become one of the drugs of choice within the club and rave scenes. The street price, though dependent on location and purity, ranges from \$400 to \$3,000 per ounce (Drug Enforcement Administration). The effects usually last from four to eight hours or more, depending on dosage.

RATES OF USE

According to both law enforcement and treatment providers, most methamphetamine users are either college students or blue-collar/unemployed workers in their 20s or 30s (Koch Crime Institute).

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THE RISKS

Although oral use is the least dangerous method of ingestion, most users rely on snorting, smoking, or injection. Smoking methamphetamine takes effect immediately and easily increases chances of addiction (DanceSafe). In addition, smoking methamphetamine exposes the user to a wide range of known and unknown hazards contained in the inhaled smoke. Injecting methamphetamine is associated with many risks, including addiction, overdose, damage to veins, bloodstream infections and the transmission of infections, such as HIV and Hepatitis B and C, through sharing syringes.

From 1994 to 1998, 2,601 deaths associated with methamphetamine were reported by selected medical examiners (Drug Abuse Warning Network 2000). Overdoses of methamphetamine can cause seizures, heart attacks, and strokes. Of primary concern is the damaging effect on the mind and body with continued heavy use.

Increased or prolonged use of methamphetamine can cause sleeplessness, loss of appetite, increased blood pressure, paranoia, psychosis, aggression, disordered thinking, extreme mood swings, and sometimes hallucinations. Many users become physically rundown, which leaves them susceptible to illness. The discontinued use of methamphetamine by heavy users will create withdrawal symptoms, including severe depression, lethargy, anxiety, and fearfulness (Goode 1999).

Some studies indicate that very large doses of methamphetamine may cause damage to dopamine, a chemical found in the brain that regulates mood and memory. The research is ongoing since studies are still inconclusive (Ernst 2000).

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RATES OF USE (cont.)

The highest rates of usage are among men and women between the ages of eighteen and twenty-three.

According to a 2002 national survey, 4 percent of eighth graders, 6 percent of tenth graders, and 7 percent of twelfth graders have tried methamphetamine at least once in their lifetime (Johnston 2003).

THE HIGH

No matter how the drug is injected, the methamphetamine user experiences a “rush” or feeling of euphoria and self-confidence. The effects of methamphetamine commonly include accelerated heart rate and blood pressure, increased alertness, loss of appetite, increased energy, desire for physical activity and inability to sleep (Goode 1999). Such effects are less pronounced with oral use and in lower dosages.

SIGNS OF USE

Frequent and/or heavy users can exhibit pupil dilation, constant talking, sweating, tooth grinding, restlessness and tremors. A methamphetamine user can become edgy or irritable and frequently shows signs of anxiety. Some heavy users become paranoid and may experience hallucinations, particularly auditory.

RECOMMENDED READING

Klee, Hilary, ed. 1997. *Amphetamine Misuse: International Perspectives on Current Trends*. Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers. ISBN: 9057020793.

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THE RISKS (cont.)

Methamphetamine is an illegal substance and possession and/or sales can result in long prison terms.

Reducing risk requires avoiding methamphetamine if heart conditions exist; discontinuing long term, heavy use to avoid paranoia, psychosis, and other adverse side effects; and not mixing methamphetamine with other drugs (particularly alcohol and other stimulants).

To eliminate risk, methamphetamines should not be used.

ABOUT SAFETY FIRST

Safety First, a project of the Drug Policy Alliance, is dedicated to providing parents of adolescents with honest, science-based information about drugs and drug education. For more information, visit www.safety1st.org.

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