

# Health Bulletin:

## Methamphetamine and HIV



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#16 in a series of Health Bulletins on issues of pressing interest to all New Yorkers

### Meth and HIV — A Dangerous Combination

- Use of methamphetamine (*meth* or *crystal meth*) is increasing in New York City.
- Recent studies indicate that meth use may increase unsafe sex and raise HIV and STD infection rates among men who have sex with men.
- Meth use in NYC is currently centered among gay men. However, in other parts of the U.S., meth is a problem in other groups, regardless of sexual orientation, gender, age, socioeconomic status, or race/ethnicity.
- In addition to the physical and psychological damage it causes, meth use often leads to compulsive sexual behaviors that increase the spread of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections.
- Because meth is highly addictive and may significantly alter sexual behavior, it has the potential to become a more serious and widespread problem, especially with regard to increased spread of HIV. Meth use also poses additional dangers to people already infected with HIV.
- Meth use often results in an intense downward spiral of addiction, which is very difficult to treat.

#### What Is Methamphetamine?

- Methamphetamine is a highly addictive central nervous system stimulant.
  - It is a white powder that can be snorted, smoked, swallowed, inserted into the anus, or injected.
  - Common street names include: meth, speed, crystal (also christina, chrissy, or tina), crank, chalk, and ice.
- Intense physical and psychological effects of meth intoxication last 6 to 12 hours. These include: increased energy and alertness; loss of appetite; and feelings of improved well-being.

#### Why Is Meth So Dangerous?

- Meth is highly addictive, and its use results in:
  - **Craving:** A strong urge for the drug.
  - **Loss of control:** Being unable to stop using meth or engaging in other high-risk behaviors.
  - **Physical dependence:** Withdrawal symptoms after stopping (anxiety, paranoia, aggression, extreme fatigue, sleep disorders, depression).
  - **Tolerance:** The need to take more and more meth to feel its effects.
- Meth increases heart rate, blood pressure, and body temperature, and dehydrates the body. An overdose can lead to convulsions or heart failure, and can be fatal.
- Heavy or prolonged meth use can lead to:
  - Depression.
  - Insomnia and other sleep disorders.
  - Paranoia.
  - Hallucinations (visual, auditory, or tactile).
  - Aggressive or violent behavior.
  - Anxiety and compulsive behaviors.
  - Periodontal disease and loss of teeth.
  - Eating disorders and malnutrition.
  - Stroke.
  - Heart and brain damage that may be permanent.
  - Death.



## How Does Meth Increase HIV Risk?

- Meth lowers inhibitions and alters judgment. The drug poses particular risks because it is often used to initiate or enhance sexual encounters, especially among men who have sex with men (MSM).
- Recent studies have shown that MSM who use meth are:
  - Less likely to use condoms, or to use them properly.
  - More likely to engage in unprotected receptive anal sex.
  - More likely to have multiple sex partners.
  - More likely to have anonymous sex partners.
  - More likely to be infected with HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases, including syphilis and hepatitis.
- Meth deadens pain receptors, so users are more likely to engage in “rough” sex. This increases HIV transmission risk due to abrasions and bleeding from cuts and tears in tissues.
- Inserting meth into the anus can damage the lining of the rectum, making it more likely to tear during anal sex, and increasing the risk of HIV infection.
- Injecting meth increases the risk of HIV, as well as of hepatitis B and C.
- Meth often causes impaired sexual functioning in men, including temporary erectile dysfunction or delayed ejaculation.
  - Because of these effects, MSM meth users are more likely to engage in receptive anal sex.
  - They are also more likely to use Viagra\* or similar drugs. Recreational Viagra use increases HIV risk factors, including greater numbers of sex partners and a higher incidence of unprotected sex.
- Meth poses additional dangers for people who already have HIV infection. People who use the drug may be likely to forget to take their HIV medications. Evidence suggests that meth also has the potential to:
  - Suppress immune system responses to HIV or other infections.
  - Cause dangerous interactions with HIV medications.
  - Increase HIV viral activity.
  - Accelerate HIV-related dementia and other health problems.

## The Downward Spiral of Meth Addiction

- Because meth is so highly addictive, experimenting with this drug is very dangerous.
- The cycle of meth addiction runs from a euphoric high to the inevitable “crash” and accompanying symptoms of depression.
- Recovery from meth addiction is possible, and it’s never too late to stop. However, treatment is difficult, and relapse is common.
  - There are no known pharmacological treatments for meth addiction. However, medications are often prescribed to ease withdrawal and treat the depression, anxiety, and psychosis that may result from meth use.
  - Cognitive behavioral therapy and 12-step peer counseling programs are the primary treatment options available.
- *Prevention is critically important.* With focused effort, we can help prevent people from using meth or refer them for treatment before their problem gets worse.

### More Information

- New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene: [nyc.gov/health](http://nyc.gov/health) or call 311
- For help with substance abuse or mental health problems: call 1-800-LIFENET (1-800-543-3638) or 311
- For information about HIV/AIDS: call 311
- Gay Men’s Health Crisis (substance abuse counseling and education): [www.gmhc.org/programs/crystal.html](http://www.gmhc.org/programs/crystal.html) or call 1-800-AIDS-NYC (1-800-243-7692)
- NYC Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Community Center (links to services): [www.gaycenter.org/surveys](http://www.gaycenter.org/surveys) or call 212-620-7310
- Crystal Meth Anonymous: [www.nycma.org](http://www.nycma.org) or call 212-642-5029
- National Institute on Drug Abuse: [www.nida.nih.gov/ResearchReports/Methamph/Methamph.html](http://www.nida.nih.gov/ResearchReports/Methamph/Methamph.html)

\* Product names are included for identification purposes only; their use does not imply endorsement by the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene.

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