

Methamphetamines: Information on Abuse and Addiction

What is Methamphetamine?

Methamphetamine, commonly known as “speed” is one of the fastest growing street drugs being used in the country today. Easily available on the streets in any city or small town, methamphetamines, sometimes known as “crank”, “ice”, “meth” or “crystal”, is an addictive stimulant drug that activates certain systems in the brain and releases high levels of the neurotransmitter dopamine, which enhances mood and body movement. People begin using this drug as a stimulant to increase energy, and experience heightened physical and mental performance, lose weight or stay awake. Many people start out as recreational users, but soon become addicted to the “high” and are unable to stop using. Methamphetamines are being used by teenagers, white and blue collar workers, athletes, students and many unemployed, underserved people.

A synthetic drug, methamphetamine has a high potential for abuse and dependence. It is illegally produced and sold in pill form, capsules, powder and chunks. It was developed in the last century from its parent drug amphetamine and was used medically in nasal decongestants, bronchial inhalers and in the treatment of obesity, narcolepsy and attention deficient disorder. In the 1970’s, methamphetamine became a drug with little legitimate medical use and with very high potential for abuse.

Where and how is methamphetamine manufactured?

The drug is both domestically produced and imported illegally into the U.S. in an “already finished” form. The use of methamphetamine has reached epidemic proportions due to the ease of either obtaining or producing it. Once dominated by a small criminal component, methamphetamine is now easily produced in clandestine “Mom and Pop” labs in all parts of the country. These labs can be found in rural, urban and suburban homes, businesses, warehouses, garages, motels or even vehicles.

The ingredients used in the manufacture of the drug are what make it so easy to produce. Until just recently, ephedrine or pseudoephedrine were commonly obtained in over-the-counter cold and asthma medications. Red phosphorous (match heads), hydrochloric acid, drain cleaner,

battery acid, lye, lantern fuel and antifreeze are all items frequently used. Methamphetamines are produced by starting with an inactive or marginally inactive ingredient such as ephedrine and combining it with other chemicals to produce the drug.

How is Methamphetamine administered and what are the effects?

The drug can be snorted intranasally, smoked, injected intravenously or ingested orally. It has been reported that some people ingest the drug by putting it on food or paper and eating it. Using the drug produces a “high” that alters mood in different ways depending on how the drug was administered. Smoking or injecting the drug produces an intense, very pleasurable “rush” that lasts a very short time and is felt by the user within 5-10 seconds after administration. Snorting or ingesting orally produces euphoria which is not as intense as smoking or injecting the drug. When snorted, the effects are felt within 3-5 minutes and when taken by mouth the effects can be felt in about 15-20 minutes.

All forms of using the drug stimulate the central nervous system. The effects can last anywhere from four - 24 hours depending on the amount used. In the short term, users may experience euphoria, alertness, paranoia, decreased appetite, irritability, anxiety, aggression or excessive talking. With prolonged use, the drug literally changes brain chemistry in profound and irreversible ways. It can cause heart failure, stroke and kidney failure and can induce intense psychological and psychiatric conditions leading to suicide or homicide. Users will be unable to sit still, lose interest in previously enjoyed people or activities, and have poor attention and concentration. It can also cause damage to an unborn fetus if used during pregnancy.

Why is methamphetamine addictive?

All addictive substances have two things in common: they produce an initial pleasurable effect, followed by a rebound unpleasant effect. Methamphetamine, which is a stimulant, produces a pleasant, positive effects, but later leaves the person feeling depressed. This is because it suppresses the normal production of dopamine, creating a chemical imbalance in the brain of the user. The user then needs more of the drug to feel normal. This pleasure/discomfort cycle leads to a loss of control over the drug and thus to the addiction.

Is there effective treatment available?

Yes, but this addiction is among the hardest to treat because the withdrawal symptoms are felt both physically and psychologically. Methamphetamine addicts are often resistant to treatment once the effects of the drug have worn off secondary to the brain chemistry damage done by use of the drug. They may experience drug craving, irritability, shaking, sweating, difficulty sleeping and increased appetite. Methamphetamine addicts can overcome the acute withdrawal side effects fairly quickly, but the desire for the drug may go on for months or years. Some users never recover due to the brain chemistry changes, and some, with a period of prolonged abstinence, are able to regain their former lifestyles and productivity. Also, relapse is very common because of the mental, physical and social components of methamphetamine abuse.

The most effective treatment is behavioral therapy or “changes in lifestyle”. These approaches are designed to help with adjusting both thoughts and behaviors and to help the person learn new positive coping skills to deal with their life stresses. Many people need intensive inpatient treatment to successfully overcome their addiction.

Why is there so much focus put upon this drug?

The trafficking and manufacturing of methamphetamine are different than other drugs because they pose a danger from start to finish. The reckless practices of untrained people who are making it in clandestine labs result in fires, explosions, danger to innocent people and to the firefighters who respond. Also, due to the nature of the toxic chemicals being used, there are often unmarked containers of dangerous substances which can damage the central nervous systems and cause permanent damage or cause irritation to the skin, eyes or nose. Damage to the environment is also a major concern, as well as the societal cost of crime, broken families, law enforcement, violence and need for health care.

What can I do?

If you suspect there is a clandestine methamphetamine lab in your neighborhood, report it to local police agencies. Do not approach these places yourself. Some of the signs of a methamphetamine lab are: strong odors similar to nail polish remover or cat urine; renters who pay cash; people who purchase large amounts of cold medicines, antifreeze, drain cleaner,

lantern fuel, batteries, duct tape, clear glass beakers and/or containers; and residences with windows blackened or boarded up and with lots of night-time traffic.

If you know someone with a methamphetamine addiction, seek help from local agencies such as Community Mental Health, Human Aid, Narcotics Anonymous and/or your family physician. The Substance Abuse, Mental Health Services Administration of the federal government has an on-line listing of licensed treatment providers. For further information, visit www.samsha.gov.

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Reference:

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