

Methamphetamine

What Kind of Drug Is It?

Methamphetamine, commonly referred to as “meth,” is a synthetic, or laboratory-made, stimulant. Stimulants increase alertness, endurance, and feelings of well-being in the user. Examples of other stimulant drugs include cocaine and caffeine. (Entries on both of these drugs are available in this encyclopedia.) Methamphetamine is considered an especially powerful and addictive substance—far more addictive even than cocaine—because of its powerful effect on the brain.

Methamphetamine was developed by a Japanese chemist in 1919 from amphetamine, another laboratory-made drug. Amphetamine increases energy, reduces appetite, and helps keep users awake. (An entry on amphetamines is also available in this encyclopedia.) The first amphetamine had been made by a German chemist in the late 1880s, but it was not used for medical purposes until decades later. In its earliest form, amphetamine was found to be an effective treatment for asthma (AZ-muh), a lung disorder that interferes with normal breathing. Because of its similar ability to unclog breathing passages, methamphetamine was originally used as a nasal decongestant.

As of 2005, the medical use of methamphetamine was extremely limited. However, illicit, or unlawful, use was quite high worldwide. Like other amphetamines, methamphetamine boosts energy levels and produces an intense rush or high in the user. These properties have made it popular with recreational drug users—those who use a drug solely to get high, not to treat a medical condition. The dangers of methamphetamine lie in its strength and its high potential for addiction. Few people can “try” methamphetamine once without wanting more. Experts in the medical, behavioral, and law enforcement fields considered meth abuse one of the most serious social threats of the early twenty-first century.

Overview

Methamphetamine is a highly addictive stimulant drug. It is closely related to amphetamine but has a longer lasting and more TOXIC effect on individuals who abuse it. Because of its potentially harmful side effects, methamphetamine is only prescribed by doctors when other

Official Drug Name: Methamphetamine (METH-am-FETT-uh-meen), methamphetamine hydrochloride (Desoxyn [des-OK-sinn]); deoxyephedrine (dee-OK-see-ih-FEH-drinn; Methedrine)

Also Known As: Batu, chalk, crank, crystal, crystal meth, glass, ice, meth, poor man’s cocaine, shabu, speed, tina, trash, ya ba, zip

Drug Classifications: Schedule II, stimulant

toxic: harmful, poisonous, or capable of causing death

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Methamphetamine is made from ingredients that are readily available in homes and stores. (Some of the products used are displayed here.) Many of the chemicals used to make meth carry warning labels noting that they are toxic or harmful if consumed. *AP/Wide World Photos.*

medications have failed to help their patients. Methamphetamine has been used with some success in individuals with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Children and adults who have been diagnosed with ADHD are typically impulsive, somewhat edgy, and have difficulty focusing and controlling their actions. These symptoms often interfere with their ability to function socially and academically. Methamphetamine is also approved for use in treating obesity as well as narcolepsy, a rare sleep disorder characterized by daytime tiredness and sudden attacks of sleep.

What is of great concern to drug-control authorities, however, is the increasingly widespread abuse of methamphetamine. During the 1990s and early 2000s, the illegal manufacture and distribution of the drug increased dramatically in the United States. According to the 2004 “National Synthetic Drugs Action Plan” prepared by the U.S. Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP), the bulk of the methamphetamine sold in the United States is produced illegally in California. “Most of the large super labs in California are run by organizations with ties to Mexico,” noted the authors of the “Action Plan.” However, record numbers of smaller, independent

labs began popping up throughout the American Midwest beginning in 2003. Authorities considered the eastward movement of the methamphetamine problem and the “dramatic increase” in these Midwestern labs to be “particularly troubling.”

The illegal use of methamphetamine had reached epidemic proportions in the United States as of 2005. According to the “2003 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH),” 12.3 million Americans age twelve and older—more than 5 percent of the U.S. population—have tried methamphetamine at least once in their lives. The majority of users that year were between the ages of eighteen and thirty-four, and more than half of the new users were under eighteen.

Homemade Meth

Methamphetamine can be manufactured or “cooked” in home laboratories. *MSNBC.com* special reporter Jon Bonné noted in the online article “Meth’s Deadly Buzz” that the drug “is easily manufactured domestically with common household items such as batteries and cold medicine.” Meth “cooks” are usually untrained, and the chemicals they use are highly flammable, meaning they are capable of catching fire and burning quickly. This increases the likelihood of accidental explosions in meth labs. Despite the risks, drug traffickers set up their operations in small spaces such as bathrooms, sheds, basements, crawl spaces, motel rooms, and even suitcases. The business has become something of a family tradition in some cases, with parents passing recipes and production tips down to their children.

In order to avoid being caught, some meth cooks set up their equipment in mobile labs. These labs might be assembled in car trunks, vans, travel trailers, motor homes, and even trucks. But because meth production has a great potential for explosions, especially among inexperienced cooks, the mobile labs become toxic time bombs that present a very real threat to police and motorists. In addition to explosions, mobile labs have been known to leak hazardous materials, resulting in road closures while the cleanup work is being done. In many cases, both mobile and non-mobile labs have to be disassembled by hazardous materials (hazmat) crews or law enforcement officers dressed in protective gear.

Abusing Meth Equals Quick Addiction

Methamphetamine produces feelings of euphoria, which is a state of extreme happiness and enhanced well-being. It also increases energy by raising the levels of two NEUROTRANSMITTERS in the brain: 1) dopamine (DOPE-uh-meen), which is a combination

neurotransmitters: substances that help spread nerve impulses from one nerve cell to another

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Narcotics task force agents are shown combing through the various chemicals used to make methamphetamine found on a truck in Kentucky. Some people make meth in vans, trucks, or trailers so they can move from place to place in order to dodge police. Moving meth labs contain toxic ingredients that can explode, causing injuries to motorists, highway closures, and thousands of dollars in damages and cleanup costs.

AP/Wide World Photos.

of carbon, hydrogen, nitrogen, and oxygen; and 2) norepinephrine (nor-epp-ih-NEFF-run), which is a natural stimulant. The drug causes excessive amounts of these chemicals to be released, resulting in a spike, or sudden increase, in their concentration in the brain.

Methamphetamine's effect on dopamine levels can help treat patients with ADHD and narcolepsy. Dopamine plays a key role in regulating attention. It acts on the part of the brain

Children of Users Suffer Neglect

The growing abuse of methamphetamine has had an enormous impact on users' children. As of 2005, the child welfare issue was particularly problematic in rural areas of the United States. Oklahoma and Kentucky seem to have been hit especially hard. The number of neglected children in these areas has skyrocketed as more and more parents have begun using, making, and selling methamphetamine at home.

According to Kate Zernike in a July 2005 *New York Times* article, the problem is compounded by the fact that these rural areas lack the kind of social services needed to help youths who have been raised in a drug-using environment. Under such circumstances, children are forced to fend

for themselves because their parents are often either high or sleeping off the effects of their last binge. When parents are arrested for their drug activity, their underage kids are typically placed in foster homes.

"Many of these neglected children struggle with emotional, developmental and abandonment issues," noted Zernike. "It has become harder to attract and keep foster parents because the children of methamphetamine arrive with so many behavioral problems; they may not get into their beds at night because they are so used to sleeping on the floor, and they may resist toilet training because they are used to wearing dirty diapers."

responsible for filtering incoming information, making choices, and deciding when and how to act. However, in users who do not have ADHD or narcolepsy, methamphetamine's effect on dopamine increases alertness, brings on a sense of happiness and contentment, and creates an urge for more and more of the drug. That is what makes it so dangerous. As Julia Sommerfeld explained in the article "Beating an Addiction to Meth" on *MSNBC.com*: "While high levels of dopamine in the brain usually cause feelings of pleasure, too much can produce aggressiveness, irritability, and schizophrenic-like behavior." Schizophrenic behavior refers to exhibiting the symptoms of schizophrenia, a severe mental disease characterized by a withdrawal from reality and other intellectual and emotional disturbances.

Methamphetamine addiction can occur easily. Users who want to lose weight take methamphetamine to decrease their appetites. Others might try it for the burst of energy it provides to cram for exams or work extra hours. But the effects of the drug are so intense that occasional users or even first-timers often find themselves craving more. *KCI: The Anti-Meth Site* posts stories of users who have been drawn into the world of addiction. Their accounts illustrate the drug's destructive effects.