

CPYU Trend Alert: Methamphetamine

by Chris Wagner

The highly addictive drug methamphetamine has become the new drug of choice among youth across the United States. Statistically, surveys have shown its use among teens to have leveled off over the last several years. However, experts believe these numbers are misleading due to many factors, including substantial anecdotal evidence that suggests a rise in its use. Meth, as it is commonly known, has a relatively cheap price tag and is readily accessible throughout the country. Some call it the "poor man's cocaine." Unfortunately, for some regions of the country, this epidemic has grown to proportions equal to, if not greater than, the cocaine crisis of urban areas throughout much of the 1980's.

One national drug use survey indicates just how prevalent this drug has become. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the number of adolescents, ages 12 and up, who have tried methamphetamine at least once in their lifetime totals over 12 million. Accessibility is one of the key components to the exponential use among today's youth. Meth can be made just about anywhere, by just about anyone. Clandestine meth labs are often set up in homes and hotel rooms. Portable labs can even be set up in the trunk of a car or stored in a briefcase. Authorities seized nearly 16,000 meth labs in the United States in 2004, with the majority being found in the Midwest. In fact, meth is the cause for nearly 90% of all drug cases in the Midwest, according to the National Clearing House for Alcohol and Drug Information.

This type of backyard drug manufacturing is perhaps what worries authorities most about this drug. Unlike other illicit drugs, there are no substances that must be smuggled in from another country. Most products used to make meth can be found at your average retail store. This makes it easier to produce, harder to monitor, and even more difficult to stop.

All it takes is a quick search on the Internet to discover how to make meth and get a list of the necessary components to make a potent batch for either personal use, or to sell for profit. The key ingredient is pseudoephedrine, commonly found in over-the-counter cold medicines. After getting their hands on some phosphorus or hydrochloric acid, meth-heads are well on their way to their next high. The process is extremely dangerous and has resulted in many injuries and deaths for those who make it, their families, and authorities who have to clean up the mess meth labs leave behind. Experts say that for every one part methamphetamine that is created, 5 parts toxic waste is also produced.

Meth can come in the form of a powder, capsule, pill, or crystal. It can be swallowed, snorted like cocaine, or smoked. "Crystal" or "Crystal Meth" is the most common name for meth in its smokable form. It can also be dissolved into liquid and injected through the veins. The basic result is a highly intensive release of dopamine, which produces a sense of well-being and extreme pleasure. This extreme "high" and the imminent crash is what draws users back again and again.

Common street names for Methamphetamine:	
Meth	Cristy
Crank	Windex
Chalk	Ice
Speed	Zip
Crystal	Candy
Crystal Meth	Glass or "G"
Salt Crystal	Quarts
Spider Crystal	L.A.
	Jibb
	Tina

The effects of meth are devastating. First, there is the usual paranoia that accompanies so many illegal drugs. Teens on meth have been known to hide in places like their bedroom closet in fear of being caught by police. Sometimes this extreme nervousness can last for days, as the user, still paranoid, will continue to use while in hiding. Other effects include confusion, anxiety, and aggressive behavior. Many students report frequent fighting while high. Even cases of violent homicide have been attributed to meth use.

Meth also takes a destructive toll on the body. The dopamine high causes elevated blood pressure and can cause permanent brain damage and lead to symptoms similar to Parkinson's disease. Convulsions, strokes, irregular heart beats, and death due to cardiovascular collapse can also occur. Early reports suggest that even those who stop using meth will have permanent struggles with anxiety and depression.

Other undesirable side-effects include "meth-mouth" which basically causes the teeth of the user to rot in as little as 30 days. Hair loss can occur, as well as a symptom known as "meth-bugs." A mixture of the toxins released in the brain cause the user to hallucinate and believe bugs are crawling under their skin. Users will scratch away at their skin in an effort to get the imaginary bugs, resulting in big patches of raw, open sores.

So what's the draw?

Despite the overwhelmingly negative effects of methamphetamine, teens continue to use the drug at alarming rates. The first, and most obvious reason people are drawn to meth is the instant "high." For the first few minutes, the euphoria they experience make those who are on methamphetamine feel like they can do anything. The high from meth is unlike the effects from any other drug, this is because of the intensity as well as the duration. The effects of the released dopamine can result in a high that lasts 10 times longer than the high from cocaine use, lasting up to as many as 20 hours.

Meth is also referred to as "speed" because it gives users an extra boost of energy and allows them to stay awake for hours on end. It usually causes sleeplessness, not allowing the user to sleep at all. Some teens are enticed by the rush of energy it brings. For those who may have to work late, or keep long hours, meth seems like a better alternative than your average No Doze pill. Colleges and Universities are also seeing the effects of meth use on campus. Students cramming for a test or needing to stay awake for an assignment or paper are looking to meth for a solution to stay awake and increase productivity.

Especially common among females is the use of meth to lose weight. Researcher Carol Falkowski of the Hazelden Foundation says "Some young teenage girls receiving treatment had no prior drug abuse histories whatsoever, but heard that methamphetamine could help them lose weight, tried it, and became quickly addicted."

Others strictly use meth for one purpose, better sex. Use by homosexual men has existed for quite some time. Recent outbreaks of HIV have been attributed to the drugs use. Once the word spread that meth was effective as an aphrodisiac, its use became more rampant. Teens are enticed because the drug promises to increase sexual performance and boost their sexual appetite. Sex is the number one reason people use meth, according to Dr. Mary Holley who runs a ministry called Mothers Against Methamphetamine. Over time the libido is so worn out that users can't have sex without being high and eventually males become impotent.

One obvious draw to meth is it's relatively cheap price tag compared to other street drugs like cocaine. Because it can be homemade, police say that anyone looking to make a few bucks can easily turn about \$150 worth of chemicals into \$10,000 worth of the drugs. Teens short on money are turning to meth for a cheap high as well as a way to make some quick cash.

A few things many users are not aware of:

Users can become addicted as early as the first attempt. The low that comes after the high wears off is so intense that users are often tempted to take meth again and again in order to sustain the high and avoid the crash. It is estimated that only 6% of users get and stay sober. This is, by far, the worst recovery rate of any drug.

The above process of repeatedly getting high off meth is often referred to as bingeing and can last up to a couple of weeks. Meth users may not sleep during this entire period. What first-time users are often not aware of is the inevitable crash that comes after the body has been worn out. During this 2-3 day period, anxiety and deep depression is experienced.

The purchase of meth is not only harmful to the user, but often innocent children as well. Since 2001, roughly 30% of the clandestine meth labs seized by authorities were homes where children live. These are children neglected by their parents, living among the toxic waste byproduct of meth, often involuntarily high from the fumes of meth, and in danger of an explosion common within meth labs.

So what's our response?

Law-makers, retail stores, police departments, and even pharmaceutical companies have already begun the response to fight meth use among our teens and the larger population. At many pharmacies, cold medicines containing pseudoephedrine are now shelved behind the counter where it is easier for their distribution to be monitored. Laws have been made putting maximum purchase limits on certain substances commonly used in making meth. Drug companies are also finding alternatives to pseudoephedrine in the production of their cold medicines, replacing it with substances that are useless in the meth making process.

These are just a handful of the ways in which this country's meth epidemic is already being addressed. However, as parents, youth workers, educators, and care-givers for this generation of teens and young adults we can step up and help make a difference as well.

First, we must do everything we can to keep our teens from experimenting, especially given the powerful addictive traits meth can have on a first-time user. Begin instilling a sense of self-worth formed from a biblical worldview at a very young age. Teens who truly realize the awesome value placed on them in God's eyes will be less likely to do harm to their bodies by using meth and other drugs.

Follow through with this by making sure they understand the devastating physiological and psychological effects of using meth. Sit down and discuss with your teen the serious risks that users face. Ask them what they already know about the drug, you may be surprised with how much they've already learned. Reinforce what they've heard that is true and helpful in keeping them away from meth. Help them discern the good from the bad from the "real-life" stories they may have heard from their peers about how much fun meth is.

Be aware that though the effects of meth have spread throughout the country, those in rural communities are currently at greater risk. According to the South Carolina Rural Health Research Center teens in rural areas are nearly twice as likely to try crystal meth as those in other regions. Another group with increased jeopardy is those who are involved in the club and rave scene. Like ecstasy, especially because of it's effects on the sex drive, meth has become popular among youth in the rave community.

Take note of the numerous signs of meth use so that you can intervene before it becomes too late. Look for physical signs, such as unusual sores on their faces, tongues, and skin. Deep scratches, resulting from "meth bug" can also be an indicator. Also keep an eye out for rapid weight loss and deep sunken eyes and cheekbones. Meth users are also known to grind their teeth heavily. Behavioral changes among teens is not uncommon, but the following have been associated with meth use: sleeplessness, aggressive behavior, paranoia, lack of appetite, drop in grades, and lack of concentration just to list a few.

Familiarize yourself with the street names given to meth and listen for phrases such as "Do you want to come over and (get) clean?" This question is popular code among users who refer to meth as "windex." An over sensitivity to light can also be an indication of meth use. Look for users to cover their windows with blankets to keep extra light from shining in. A collection of household chemicals and multiple purchases of cold medicine is a dead give away that someone may be making meth. Other signs include missing light bulbs and stray pieces of aluminum foil, which can both be used in different methods of smoking crystal meth.

Finally, pray for our teens. They need it. Unfortunately, the thrill and excitement teens get from experimenting with drugs is very tempting. They need us to stick with them through adolescence, pray beside them, and encourage them to make Godly decisions.

**For more information on today's youth culture, visit the website of the
Center for Parent/Youth Understanding at
www.cpyu.org.**