

The Problem with Speed: The Growing Use of Methamphetamine

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The use of methamphetamine (Speed) is a growing problem in the United States. On the West Coast of this country and in many rural Midwestern states, methamphetamine use is rising and is considered by the Office of National Drug Control Policy (ONDCP) to be one of the most important drug problems in U.S. It has affected many types of communities, both rural and urban, men and women, gay and straight.

During my fellowship in Substance Abuse and Addiction at the University of California San Francisco, I concentrated on the use of crystal methamphetamine in the gay male community. I have given lectures on this topic to psychiatrists, medical students, and HIV prevention workers. In the process, I have learned that although the gay community has sustained many adversities, including homophobia and the HIV epidemic, methamphetamine use and addiction may be the most pernicious of these and a cause of high rates of psychiatric side effects like aggression and paranoia.

Methamphetamine is a stimulant. It can be used orally, nasally, or rectally and can also be smoked or injected. Most of the supply of methamphetamine is local, made in rural areas of the U.S. When first used, it can cause a surge of euphoria and energy. It also increases a person's heart rate and blood pressure. Someone who uses too much can have untoward side effects like aggression, paranoia, and hallucinations. Long-term side effects include persistent hallucinations, aggressive behavior, and memory damage. Medical consequences can include stroke, heart attack, seizures, and sudden death.

Why are gay men susceptible to this drug? Gay men have a long history of using mind-altering substances. Substance abuse rates are higher in LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transsexual) populations compared with heterosexual counterparts. Theories of why this is the case include the way that gay men are socialized (gay men generally "come out" in venues such as gay bars) or the fact that gay men tend to use substances to cope with the fear of seroconverting to HIV-positive (that is, testing positive for the HIV antibody) or internalized homophobia. It is known that the use of methamphetamine doubles the risk of gay men becoming HIV-positive.

Methamphetamine is also known to increase one's sex drive. With women, we see the rates of childbirth increase; with gay men, we see the rates of HIV seroconversion increase. From qualitative studies, we find that gay men engage in sexual marathons using high-risk venues like bathhouses, parks, or the Internet to find sexual partners. Gay men's first introduction to the drug is generally under sexual circumstances.

When does the use of methamphetamine become a problem? Generally, when people become addicted and their drug use is seriously affecting major areas of their lives, including family, work, and health. When individuals have lost control of their drug use, drug treatment is the best way to gain their life back.

I have spent a significant amount of time with people in drug treatment programs. Drug treatment comes in many flavors: community based, hospital based, and transitional communities. I see that groups and structure offer addicts the best hope of sobriety. In a major drug treatment study coordinated by UCLA, it was shown that methamphetamine addicts who enter drug treatment programs stay sober longer and do better in their lives. In addition, it was found that gay men who enter into a gay-specific drug treatment program and address sexual

issues along with drug issues decrease both their drug use and their risky sexual behavior. Ultimately, as methamphetamine use increases on the West Coast, so will the need for effective drug treatment centers that will help those people suffering from the disease of addiction.

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