

Methamphetamine

Methamphetamine is in the news - constantly. Despite little hard evidence that use is on the increase here, experience elsewhere and the relative ease with which it can be produced, are continuing to fuel headlines about an impending "Ice Age". This briefing looks at why the drug is causing so much concern, the at risk groups and what is being done to combat the threat.

What is methamphetamine?

Methamphetamine is a synthetic stimulant drug closely related to amphetamine. It comes in powder, tablet and crystal form and can be injected, snorted, swallowed or smoked so is highly versatile. Its effects are similar to cocaine or amphetamine in that it gives users a high but the feeling of euphoria is more intense than with other stimulants and it lasts for much longer - hours rather than minutes. Other effects are disinhibition, decreased appetite and increased sex drive. Easily made from readily available precursor chemicals, the toxicity of the drug varies significantly depending on the form it is taken in and method of production, but crystal meth tends to be more potent than other forms. Regular use can lead to severe psychological addiction, mental health problems, including psychosis, and erectile dysfunction, sometimes referred to as "crystal dick".

How prevalent is crystal meth use in the UK?

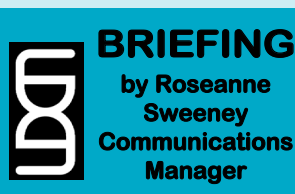
The British Crime Survey does not distinguish between methamphetamines and amphetamines, so even this crude method of estimating usage is not available in this instance. But other indicators suggest its use remains low and confined to a small number of groups. The National Treatment Agency says the drug barely registers on National Drug Treatment Monitoring System (NDTMS) data while drug agencies report few instances of clients seeking help for methamphetamine use.

The police however believe there are signs that its use is on the increase. They recently told the Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs (ACMD) that they have identified a small number of meth

labs in London, and are aware of a criminal network importing the drug from America. This was the principal reason why the ACMD decided to reverse its advice given to the Home Office last year, to maintain methamphetamine as a Class B drug. The drug will now be reclassified as a Class A drug probably by the end of the year. The Metropolitan police meanwhile have said they are aware of some meth dealers making healthy profits on London's gay club scene.

Who are the at risk groups?

The main at risk groups identified by



the ACMD's report into methamphetamine are clubbers, gay men, and some South East Asian communities, where its use and manufacture are more widespread. Even among these groups, however, research suggests its use is not yet commonplace and does not appear to be increasing significantly. A survey published in *Addiction* journal earlier this month put the number of gay men in London who use crystal meth at ten per cent, and said most of these were infrequent users. This is roughly in line with the findings of the national *Gay Mens Sex Survey 2005* which quizzed men about their drug use, as well as sexual behaviour. Another survey carried out among gay gym users in central London, published last year, suggested that more gay men were using the drug. This however has been explained by the fact that the gym users were essentially people on the gay club scene, while the lower estimate may be more representative of the wider gay community.

What is the Government doing to counter the threat?

The main reason the police wanted methamphetamine reclassified was to allow resources to be targeted at tackling the drug's supply and to close down ice houses, much like with crack houses. This will now happen. Steps could also be taken to control the supply of precursor chemicals and monitor more closely the importation and use of crystal meths.

What about its link with HIV?

Crystal meth has been linked to risky sexual behaviour and much of the publicity around the drug in the U.S has focused on its link with increased HIV prevalence. Some commentators believe there are signs of the same thing happening here. Will Nutland from the Terence Higgins Trust said that "crystal is increasingly and simplistically being linked in the eyes of the mainstream and parts of the gay press to unsafe sexual behaviour amongst gay men. Just as with ...bath houses in the 1980s, crystal has become the causal explanation for HIV infections among gay men". But the academic who led the research here into meth use among gay men said it is not possible to establish a casual link. He said though there is undoubtedly a link between the drug and unsafe sex - the most recent survey found that men who reported unsafe sex were at least twice as likely to have used crystal meth as those who did not - the same is also true of the much more widely used cocaine and ecstasy. This points to the conclusion that some gay men are leading a riskier lifestyle and methamphetamine is just part of the picture.

C.O.C.A has launched a Methamphetamine Watch to collate anecdotal data on developments in meth use in the UK. Go to www.coca.org.uk