

WHAT IT IS

Methamphetamine (meth) is one of many drugs in a group called amphetamines, which are central nervous system stimulants, and include such drugs as caffeine and nicotine. Methamphetamine is most commonly called meth, crank, or speed. It's a powerful stimulant that starts as a transparent white powder, which can be snorted. The powder is also often formed into pills to be swallowed, or into a liquid to be injected.

Crystal meth is a solid form of the drug that looks something like shards of glass, and can be smoked.

WHAT IT DOES

Meth stimulates specific chemicals in your brain and nervous system, making you feel energetic, happy, and confident. This usually results in increased activity and decreased appetite. The effects of meth generally last from 6 to 8 hours.

SHORT-TERM EFFECTS

Taking meth may cause you to feel restless, anxious, dizzy, confused, and shaky. Some people even feel hostile and violent on this drug. Unfortunately, it's easy to overdose on meth, regardless of how it's taken. Meth can give you seizures, a heart attack, or a stroke, which may lead to death.

Crystal meth can produce the same side effects as well as giving you acne-like sores on your skin, severe stomach pain, convulsions, and headaches. You may also feel depressed and even suicidal.

The effects of alertness and increased energy that meth may give is the reason why many students (cramming for exams) and shift workers (e.g., truck drivers) become dependent on this drug. But it doesn't solve any problems: users of meth may be able to stay awake for a prolonged period, but they often need to sleep for a long time when the effect of the drug wears off, and sleeping patterns can be disrupted for weeks afterwards.

LONG-TERM EFFECTS

Using methamphetamine regularly is dangerous. First, you can become addicted quickly. But regular users may also become easily agitated, violent, anxious, confused, and can have trouble sleeping. They can suffer from paranoia, delusions, and hallucinations in both their vision and hearing. Many meth users experience disturbing hallucinations of insects crawling underneath their skin, which causes them to scratch at themselves, leading to large lesions and skin infections. Sometimes the paranoia brought on by using meth gives users homicidal or suicidal thoughts. It is particularly dangerous to combine meth and alcohol or other drugs.

And using needles to inject meth is very dangerous, as sharing needles increases your chances of contracting HIV, the virus that leads to AIDS.

Long-term methamphetamine use can damage the brain. Scientists say that up to half the cells in the brain that produce dopamine and serotonin (important chemicals that help regulate our moods and emotions) can be damaged or destroyed by meth use. New studies are also showing that this brain damage is similar to damage caused by strokes or Alzheimer's disease.

ADDICTION

You can become quickly addicted to meth, and stopping use of methamphetamine isn't easy. You might feel depressed, anxious, tired, paranoid, or aggressive, all the while experiencing intense cravings for the drug. This often leads to a cycle of "binging" (using the drug a lot) and then "crashing" (feeling depressed and exhausted).

Some people who are addicted to meth continue to function in the world. However, the user's work, family, and social life are often affected by the user's increasingly paranoid, erratic, and sometimes aggressive behaviour, as well as damage to memory and ability to focus.

REDUCING THE RISKS

- Don't mix meth with other drugs or alcohol.
- When a person is "coming down" from a high, he or she must resist the urge to take more of the drug, or else they're at risk of addiction.
- Taking meth orally (in pill form) is less risky than in other forms, like smoking crystal meth, or injecting meth, which puts the user at risk of HIV.
- If you think someone may be overdosing on meth, call 911 immediately.

BET YOU DIDN'T KNOW

In the past, amphetamines were prescribed as medical treatment for obesity. But soon it became clear that these "diet pills" came with too many adverse side effects. Patients certainly lost weight—but they also experienced sleep loss, depression, anxiety, memory loss, and the many other serious side effects described above. Now, health experts specifically warn *against* their use as weight loss aids.

THOUGHT QUESTIONS

1. There are many dangerous side effects to using methamphetamines. How might some of these affect your life?
2. Some people use amphetamines to stay alert (awake). What are some healthy alternatives to do this?
3. How risky do you think it is to use methamphetamines, even one time?

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