

## METHAMPHETAMINE USE AND HEALTH

The introduction of more pure forms of ice and base has led to an increase in problems associated with the use of methamphetamine. People who use ice and base are at over double the risk of being dependent on the drug. This increases their risk of many other mental and physical health problems.

### *Dependence on methamphetamine*

- People who inject methamphetamine or smoke ice are at high risk of **dependence**. This is because smoking or injecting methamphetamine are very effective ways of delivering a large amount of the drug directly to the brain, and give a rapid and intense drug onset or ‘rush’ of euphoria.
- **Dependence** is when a person has trouble cutting back on their use even though using the drug has started causing them problems (e.g., social, financial, health) but the person has trouble cutting back on their use. Typically people who are **dependent** on the drug either inject or smoke methamphetamine, and use the drug at least twice per week.

The hallmark signs of methamphetamine dependence are<sup>1</sup>:

1. Using methamphetamine in larger amounts or over a longer period than intended
  2. A persistent desire to cut down or unsuccessful attempts to reduce methamphetamine use
  3. Spending a lot of time getting methamphetamine, using the drug or recovering from its after-effects
  4. Reducing or giving up important social, work or recreational activities to take methamphetamine
  5. Continuing to use methamphetamine despite problems caused by the drug or knowing that the drug will make existing health problems worse
  6. Tolerance, that is, needing to use the drug in larger amounts to get the same effect
  7. Feeling symptoms of withdrawal from methamphetamine, or avoiding symptoms of withdrawal by continued drug use, such as using the drug first thing in the morning to avoid feeling lethargic and depressed.
- **Withdrawal symptoms** for methamphetamine include feeling depressed, irritable, restless, lethargic, and physical complaints such as stomach cramps, aches, nausea, rapid heart beat and hot and cold flushes.
  - Most of the health problems from methamphetamine use occur among people who are dependent on the drug.

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<sup>1</sup> For more detail see Topp, L., & Mattick, R. P. (1997). Validation of the amphetamine dependence syndrome and the SAMDQ. *Addiction*, 92, 151-162.

### ***What are the main health problems?***

***Mental health:*** Dependent methamphetamine users suffer from poor mental health. Over three-quarters report some level of impairment in their mental health functioning. Common complaints include:

- agitation or aggression,
- decreased motivation or ability to maintain usual activities,
- symptoms of depression and anxiety,
- psychotic symptoms such as paranoia and hallucinations, and
- decreased concentration or memory.

***Physical well-being:*** Around half of dependent methamphetamine users suffer from poor physical health relative to their non-drug using peers. Specific physical complaints related to methamphetamine use included:

- disturbed sleep,
- jaw clenching and teeth grinding,
- weight loss due to poor appetite,
- palpitations and chest pains,
- injection related problems (e.g., abscesses) among injectors, and
- nasal irritation among people who snort the drug.

***Injecting risk behaviour:*** Methamphetamine injectors are at risk for hepatitis C and other blood borne infections through unsafe injecting practices such as needle sharing. Injecting risk behaviour among methamphetamine injectors is similar to that for other drug injectors.

***Sexual risk behaviour:*** Dependent methamphetamine users are more likely to engage in unprotected sex compared to their peers who use methamphetamine but are not dependent on the drug. However, it is not clear whether unsafe sexual practices are linked to methamphetamine intoxication or other circumstantial factors, such as the drug using lifestyle or the nature of relationships among dependent methamphetamine users.

***Social and financial problems:*** Other problems experienced by some heavy methamphetamine users include social isolation, relationship breakdowns, and financial difficulties. Some methamphetamine users also become involved in crime, such as drug dealing or theft, to support their drug use, and may also have been arrested and/or have been to prison.

***Psychosis:*** Methamphetamine use can induce a brief psychosis consisting of paranoia and hallucinations, and can also worsen symptoms among people who have schizophrenia or other chronic psychotic disorders. Around three in ten dependent methamphetamine users will experience psychotic symptoms during a given year. Symptoms usually last up to 2-3 hours, but sometimes last longer and result in the person being hospitalised.