



High risk of dependence and psychosis among “ice” drug-takers: new research

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Twelve thousand Sydneysiders or nearly two-thirds of those who take ‘ice’ (crystalline methamphetamine) are dependent on the drug, according to a major new study of Australia’s methamphetamine market by the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC).

The report reveals that nearly two-thirds (61 per cent) of those who use ‘ice’ are dependent on it. Methamphetamine has emerged in recent years as a drug commonly used in the “party scene”.

Methamphetamine is a synthetic stimulant drug sold under various street names, including ‘speed’, ‘base’, ‘meth’, ‘ice’, ‘crystal’ or ‘crystal meth’, and ‘amphetamines’. Ice, which is also known as ‘crystal meth’, is methamphetamine in its purest form, typically has a purity of around 80 per cent.

Funded by the National Drug Law Enforcement Research Fund (NDLERF), the report gives a comprehensive insight into the methamphetamine market, including its importation, distribution, demand, price, criminal involvement and health impacts.

Titled *The Sydney methamphetamine market: patterns of supply, use, personal harms and social consequences*, the report includes data from numerous sources, including:

- 310 regular methamphetamine users from metropolitan Sydney
- 55 methamphetamine dealers
- 54 health and law enforcement officials
- 2905 emergency-department records from an inner Sydney hospital
- Forensic records on drug purity and appearance from Victorian methamphetamine seizures
- State and Federal law enforcement bodies.

Among the report’s key findings are the following:

- Those who inject or smoke methamphetamine are more likely to be dependent on it than those who snort or swallow it
- Methamphetamine users are 11 times more likely to have experienced a psychotic episode than people in the general population

- Nearly one-quarter (23 per cent) of surveyed methamphetamine users reported having symptoms of psychosis, such as hallucinations and paranoia
- Dependent methamphetamine users were three times more likely than non-dependent users to report having symptoms of psychosis
- Other health problems reported by dependent methamphetamine users include depression, anxiety, sleep problems, weight loss, jaw clenching, grinding teeth and chest pain.

According to **Dr Rebecca McKetin**, the report's lead author, 58 per cent of those who smoke methamphetamine are dependent, compared to 30 per cent of those who snort or swallow the drug. Sixty seven per cent of those who inject methamphetamine are dependent on the drug.

"Smoking ice is a very addictive way to use methamphetamine," says Dr McKetin, an NDARC Research Fellow. "It provides an instant drug effect with few immediate deterring side-effects. The concern with smoking ice is that it could introduce non-injecting drug users into a form of drug-taking that is likely to increase their likelihood of becoming dependent.

"Ice is a particularly potent form of methamphetamine, which is associated with high levels of dependence and psychosis. Methamphetamine users are 11 times more likely to have had a psychotic episode than the general population.

"Because methamphetamine is available in several forms, including 'speed', 'base', 'ice' and pills, it's likely to introduce a broad segment of people to the methamphetamine market," Dr McKetin says. "The more pure forms of ice and base make up over two-thirds of the methamphetamine market, while an unknown amount ends up on the ecstasy market, being sold as 'pills'.

Other research has found that almost one in ten Australians report having taken the drug at some stage.

"We need more information on how to treat people who are dependent on methamphetamine and those who have had a psychotic episode," says Dr McKetin. "This is important for users and the safety of health practitioners and law enforcement personnel who deal with them."

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