

Crystal Meth and Youth

Effective Treatment and Prevention Practices

The following article looks at the prevention and treatment of crystal methamphetamine (or “crystal meth”) problems, with a focus on effective community strategies for preventing the use of crystal meth by youth, and helping youth who are using crystal meth.

Crystal Meth

Methamphetamine is a stimulant. It is one of the amphetamines, a group of chemicals related by their molecular structure and content. The drug is not as new or as different as we may think; because it is a type of amphetamine, almost everything that can be said about the effects of amphetamines is also true of methamphetamine.

Crystal meth is a smokable form of methamphetamine. It is made from ingredients that can be bought in local drug and hardware stores. The chemical composition can differ depending on the specific ingredients used. Since this drug can be manufactured in unregulated, illegal labs with everyday ingredients and does not need to be imported, in some parts of Alberta it is easy to find and cheaper to buy than many other drugs.

Crystal meth produces a longer “high” than other stimulants. Taken orally, it produces a high within 30 to 60 minutes. Snorting the drug leads to a high within two to five minutes. If crystal meth is injected or smoked, there is an instant high.

The user experiences high levels of energy, wakefulness and enhanced performance. Additional positive effects include feelings of joy, power, success, and high esteem; and increased sexual desire and interest.

Some of the commonly experienced problems for users are nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, itching, welts on the skin and uncontrolled body movements. The extent and seriousness of these problems depend on the amount used, and the pattern and duration of use.

Some users experience delusional thinking, paranoia, and violent behaviour. Using this drug, which can put even young people at risk for heart problems and stroke, causes increased blood pressure, heart rate and high body temperatures. Some users experience seizures.

When the users are coming “down” from the drug there is an increased sense of paranoia, confusion, agitation, and possible violence.

Problems that will persist while users are under the influence of this drug are disturbed sleep, irritability, nervousness, distractibility and difficulty focusing and remembering. This can be followed by extreme depression and suicide. There is some evidence to suggest that nerve pathways in youth using crystal meth are changed, resulting in youth experiencing confusion and other problems.

Treatment

Research indicates that, generally speaking, treatment for crystal meth use is similar to treatment for use of other stimulants like cocaine.

It is critical for crystal meth abusers to have quick and easy access to treatment. They need to feel safe and comfortable. They will also need an environment that is able to provide some basic interventions before entering more formal treatment.

Stabilization

Crystal meth users need to be assessed for acute health risk: for example, blood pressure should be monitored and body temperature should be taken. If blood pressure and body temperature are too high, the young person should be taken to a hospital or medical facility. Anyone who is displaying out-of-control, violent behaviour and is a danger to him—or herself or others should be referred to a medical facility for possible sedation.

Additional health concerns may include infection of open sores and generally rundown physical condition.

Once acute health needs are met, the young person will need the opportunity to sleep, drink fluids, and eat healthy meals. During the “crash” period of stabilization, planned sleep has proven to be helpful. Planned sleep may mean, for example, allowing the person to sleep for four hours, gently waking them and providing fluids, then allowing them to sleep again for four hours, and repeating the pattern. Meals should include lots of fresh fruit, vegetables, herbal teas, water, simple digestible protein (eggs, yogurt), and natural sugars (apples, carrots).

This period of stabilization can last from two to four weeks. The young person’s behaviour may be an issue during this time; youth may experience paranoid thoughts and feelings and exhibit violent behaviour in response to their confusion and paranoia.

The following steps can be taken to reduce the risk of violent outbursts:

- Keep the environment simple and quiet with low stimulus.
- Maintain a safe distance (seven to 10 feet) because closeness may be threatening.
- Keep voices lowered, remain calm.
- Speak clearly but slowly.
- Reassure the person that this experience is a normal part of withdrawal.
- Try to avoid jerky movements, and keep hands visible.

Counseling Sessions

The early sessions of methamphetamine treatment should be structured and focus on early recovery skills (for example, acquiring abstinence and the skills necessary to stabilize abstinence; identification of triggers and the development of strategies to address the triggers). There should be topic for each session so both the counselor and young person know what to expect.

These early sessions should match the person's ability to pay attention. This could mean offering sessions that are shorter in length but happen more frequently. This will be helpful because the client may have difficulty retaining what they learned over many days. Repetition in the treatment of meth users is helpful due to their reduced attention span and cognitive skills.

Motivational interviewing skills and relapse prevention approaches have proven to be of value in working with methamphetamine users. Elements of successful substance abuse treatment also make sense for methamphetamine treatment: (a) a positive relationship with a counselor (b) avoiding the company of people with a drug-based lifestyle, (c) attendance and follow-up with support groups.

Community Responses To Crystal Methamphetamine Drug Use

One of the most effective ways to address an emerging illicit drug problem in the community is to bring individuals and organizations together to work as a group. Prevention best practice research suggests that youth and adults need to work collaboratively to build a plan of action to address a youth drug problem. Working as a community group allows the partners in the group to take advantage of the resources that already exist in the community and coordinate their work for maximum effect. Issues surrounding crystal methamphetamine use involve all major life areas and it makes sense to include as many partners as possible that are concerned with the health and safety of communities. Community partners could include (but are not limited to) youth, parents, teachers, children's authorities, health services, police/law enforcement, religious organizations, media, concerned citizens, local businesses, and politicians.

Key steps are

1. forming a community group
2. establishing shared overall goals
3. conducting a community needs assessment
4. choosing activities
5. developing a plan of action
6. assembling resources
7. beginning your evaluation
8. keeping the community group going

For a detailed plan on how to work with community partners, consult the AADAC manual *Community Action on Drug Abuse Prevention*.

Here are some examples of community activities that address the issue of crystal meth:

- schools taking a lead role to provide age-appropriate information in their lesson plans for students
- parent advisory groups meeting to learn about the properties of the drug and provide good parenting tips
- health care facilities providing medical attention that addresses the physical side effects of the drug and linking youth to appropriate services
- addiction agencies providing addiction treatment in collaboration with local Children Services staff, who provide safe and positive living environments
- local social and recreational agencies providing after-school groups, social clubs, and creating other recreational opportunities

It is important that the community develop ownership of the problem and the solution to the problem. It is crucial to build the capacity of the community to sustain ongoing prevention efforts, and to mount a coordinated treatment response for youth involved with crystal meth.



Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission
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For more information, contact your local AADAC office,
call 1-866-33AADAC or visit our website at www.aadac.com