



THE MENACE IS REAL



IF THERE WAS EVER ANY DOUBT in our minds that crystal meth is a dangerous and deadly drug with horrible consequences for individuals, families and communities, the information we learned and the stories we heard about crystal meth and its impact dispelled any questions in the minds of Task Force members.

To set the context for what we're up against, it's important to start with the facts – what we know about crystal meth, how it affects people, and who is using and abusing crystal meth.

#### **WHAT ARE METHAMPHETAMINE AND CRYSTAL METH?**

Methamphetamine (meth) is a stimulant. It is a derivative of amphetamine, a synthetic stimulant first synthesized in Japan in 1919. It is sold on the street as jib, crank, meth, speed, glass, fire, ice and other street names. Meth is available as a powder, and can be taken orally, snorted or injected.

Crystal meth is a smokeable form of methamphetamine that is produced from d-methamphetamine, the most potent form of the drug. Typically, the drug is heated or vaporized and the fumes are inhaled, allowing the drug to enter the bloodstream very rapidly. Young people tend to gravitate toward crystal meth because it is smokeable. It takes only about eight seconds for the drug to get to a person's brain.

Methamphetamine is not legally available in Canada. The drug can be produced virtually anywhere – small sheds, basements and even mobile labs in the back of a car or trailer. These makeshift laboratories are extremely dangerous due to the presence of highly flammable liquids and corrosive chemicals, usually mixed by people with no experience or expertise in handling such dangerous products.

The majority of meth sold on the street is produced in undercover super-labs which can produce more than 4.6 kg (10 pounds) at one time or mid-level labs which produce less than 4.1 kg (nine pounds) at one time. These labs are often referred to by police as clandestine labs. While there are larger numbers of small-scale labs, they produce only about 5 per cent of the meth available on the streets. The small scale or home-based labs, often operated by meth users themselves, produce one ounce at a time – enough for the user – and a small amount to sell to help cover the cost of their addiction.

Meth is easy and inexpensive to make, using ingredients called precursor chemicals. A recipe for meth includes products such as over-the-counter cold medications, paint thinner, household products like drain cleaner and agricultural chemicals such as anhydrous ammonia.

Relative to other drugs, meth is cheap to buy, making it highly attractive to children and youth. Meth is not always the drug of choice for youth addicted to drugs, but if it is available, they will often choose it. Meth is considered to be a "dirty" drug and it is referred to as the "poor man's cocaine."

## WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF CRYSTAL METH?

Crystal meth is highly addictive, providing an extended high and an overwhelming sense of euphoria, lasting between eight and 24 hours.

People who use crystal meth say that it:

- Allows them to stay awake for extended periods of time
- Increases their concentration
- Helps them lose weight
- Results in increased sexual desire and performance
- Gives them a sense of confidence and power

Sounds good, especially to young people. But those “good feelings” only last while the person is high. In fact, individuals who become meth users are addicted more quickly and experience much worse effects from prolonged use than with other drugs. The negative impact kicks in quickly and includes:

- A feeling of insects crawling under your skin (scratching causes “crank bites”)
- Hallucinations
- Restlessness
- Increased heart rate, body temperature and blood pressure (may cause stroke, heart attack and chest pain)
- Impulsiveness
- Upset stomach, nausea, vomiting and diarrhea
- Tweaking (irritability, unpredictable behavior, and miserable feelings as the high wears off)
- Uncontrolled body movements, including seizures that can be fatal
- Amphetamine psychosis (confusion, paranoia and aggressive or violent behavior)
- Extreme depression
- Greatly increased risk of HIV, hepatitis C and other diseases when meth is injected
- Risk of severe injury or death from overdose

If people continue to use crystal meth over a longer period of time, it results in:

- Rapid, unhealthy weight loss
- Brain damage
- Insomnia and restlessness
- Crank bites (skin sores caused by repetitive scratching and picking)
- Meth mouth (dental problems caused by dry mouth, neglected dental hygiene, poor nutrition and the acidity of meth)
- Memory problems and an inability to focus
- Severe depression and suicidal thoughts
- Sexual difficulties
- High tolerance and strong psychological withdrawal
- Greatly increased risk of HIV, hepatitis C and other diseases when meth is injected
- Long-term damage to nerve endings (some of which may be permanent)
- Risk of severe injury or death from overdose

The damage caused by meth is rampant and far-reaching. And it’s not just isolated to the people who are using meth. It extends to everyone who surrounds the users, including immediate family members, friends, and the broader community.

According to AADAC, the impact on others includes:

- Significant family disruption, mistrust, difficulty of family members coping with their family member’s use
- Conflict with schoolmates, teachers, colleagues and bosses that may result in school expulsion and loss of employment
- Harm to the community through violence, property crime, and environmental damage

Producing crystal meth also has potentially serious and deadly consequences in the community. The hazards of meth labs include exposure to precursor chemicals, toxic fumes and poisonous gases, fires and explosions, property damage caused by contamination,

*“Meth addiction is cunning and baffling. It starts out as a harmless and fun thing to do and then, before you know it, your whole life becomes centred on it and it gets to the point where you can’t imagine life without it. But you’re unable to live with it.”*

– Meth user

## Why do young people use crystal meth?

*"I feel like a superhero that is smart and invincible."*

*"I like the long high."*

*"It makes you a more open person."*

*"It makes life easier because a person doesn't have to deal with anything."*

*"I really didn't know how addictive it was. I thought I could control the drug. I thought I was smarter than the drug."*

dangers to first responders, such as police, fire fighters and clean up crews, and harm to the environment.

The destructive effects of meth can be seen in our communities when users vandalize property, steal, lie or engage in the production of meth in our neighborhoods. Families and friends of users, who have been through the challenge of urging addicts to seek treatment to escape the harmful effects of this drug, are also deeply affected. In some cases, addiction to crystal meth can lead children and youth to become involved in prostitution.

The increase in meth use is reflected in a significant and steady expansion of hospital admissions, police contacts and the number of clients seeking treatment in community treatment centers. Overall, the cost to the health system due to meth use is steadily rising as users are at increased risk for dramatic injuries and motor vehicle accidents, require more emergency room visits, and suffer from many other serious health conditions.

## WHO IS USING AND ABUSING CRYSTAL METH?

Crystal meth is particularly alarming because it's highly addictive, easily accessible, cheap to buy, and popular among young people.

Most meth users tend to use other drugs as well. In addition to meth, they may also use ecstasy, marijuana or other drugs at the same time. The burden of mental and physical illness associated with drug use rises when multiple drugs are taken.

Meth users tend to be between the ages of 10 and 25; however, meth is also used by adults over 25. Not all meth users are street youth and homeless adults. Many users start out living at home, attending school or holding down a job, but end up living on the street as the addiction progresses.

One frightening fact is that some children, youth and young adults can be exposed to meth and not even know it. More and more, drug producers are adding meth to other drugs because it is so inexpensive and it gives other drugs greater addictive qualities. Police in Alberta estimate that about 70 to 75 per cent of the ecstasy sold on the street contains methamphetamine.

The Task Force met with many youth that used or are still using meth. They spoke about how they used meth to get away from family, to lose weight, to experience a new high, because it was there, because it was cheap and because the high was so great and immediate.

The Task Force heard from educators, students, police and service providers that the prevalence of meth in schools is growing as dealers find new ways to target children and youth and sell the drug.

Alcohol, cannabis and cocaine are the most common drugs of choice in Alberta; however, methamphetamine use is on the rise in the province. While meth use remains relatively low in the general population, it is increasing most notably among street-involved youth, specific groups within the gay community and young adults in the party scene.

There have been a greater number of clandestine lab seizures throughout western Canada. This expansion in the meth industry has the potential to increase availability and lower prices, which could ultimately result in a larger number of users. The Western Canada Summit on Methamphetamine 2004 heard from multiple sources that law enforcement data, production statistics and prevalence rates show a gradual migration in meth use from the West Coast toward Manitoba.

## My Mom's reaction

*"After losing her trust, stealing from her and lying to her face, my Mom tried to kick me out numerous times, but I would never listen to her until she filed a restraining order against me. I was forced out of my home by the police and told that I was not welcome back anytime soon. I had dropped out of school and I was homeless. I was unable to find a shelter and spent a couple of nights sleeping behind a local church until I finally found a shed. I was hungry, tired and lonely."*

– A crystal meth user

