

The Ice Epidemic

The media has drawn our attention to the “Ice Epidemic” in Australia.¹ What is “Ice”, where does it come from, what does it do to the body, how widespread is its use, how does it affect our communities and how can we effectively help to combat this drug problem?

Definition:

“Ice” is a street name for one type of methamphetamine, a class of powerfully addictive and dangerous stimulants that affect the central nervous system and speed up the brain, with chronic abuse leading to psychotic behaviour. Developed from its parent drug, amphetamine, methamphetamine was used originally in nasal decongestants and bronchial inhalers. It has also been prescribed for attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, narcolepsy and chronic obesity. When used illegally, methamphetamine is referred to as “speed,” “meth,” or “chalk.” In its smoked form, it is called “ice,” “crank,” “Christmas tree,” “glass,” and “crystal” or “crystal meth.”² Experts claim that “ice” can be up to 20 times stronger than “speed”.³

Methamphetamines are usually found in a powder form, easily dissolve in beverages, range in colour from white to tan, and can either be swallowed, inhaled, inserted, injected or smoked in a glass pipe.^{4,5} Swallowed or snorted, methamphetamines give the user an intense high. Injections create a quick but strong intense high, called a rush or a flash.⁶ “Crystal meth” or “ice” is the white, odourless, bitter-tasting crystalline, smokeable form of the drug. An impure form is sold as a crumbly brown or off-white rock commonly referred to as “peanut butter crank.”⁷ Smoking Ice is now the fastest growing method used in Australia. This method results in an instantaneous rush of euphoria for the user. Therefore, it is a popular drug, especially with young adults and for those who frequent dance clubs and parties.

Production:

Clandestine chemical laboratories mostly produce ice from readily available household products or over-the-counter cold or allergy medicines containing ephedrine or pseudo-ephedrine.⁸ Highly toxic chemicals like battery acid, drain cleaner, lantern fuel, lead acetate and antifreeze are used to produce ice. Street methamphetamines usually contain a mixture of pure amphetamines and other substances such as sugar, bicarbonate of soda or ephedrine. Purity levels vary the dosage amount, increasing the risk of accidental overdose. Production is relatively simple, but the ignitable, corrosive, and toxic nature of the chemicals used to produce the drug can cause fires, explosions, produce toxic vapours, and damage the environment.⁹ The main producers of Ice in Australia are highly organized crime syndicates mainly operating in Queensland. Given the availability of inexpensive and readily available ingredients, the drug is easily made in these hidden laboratories - which contribute to its high potential for widespread abuse.¹⁰

Effects:

Like cocaine and crack, methamphetamines and amphetamines give the user the ability to stay awake and engage in continuous activity. They create a feeling of euphoria. They elevate a person's heart rate, breathing, blood pressure and body temperature. They cause sweating, headaches, dilated pupils, blurred vision, dry mouth, hot flashes, and dizziness.^{11,12}

Ice reduces appetite. In a society where being thin and beautiful is important to many young people, using “meth” is a dangerous method of weight loss.¹³ Since it decreases the appetite, the weight loss seems almost effortless. However, after the user stops using the drug, the weight is regained very quickly, resulting in an increased usage of the drug in an attempt to control their weight. Ice use also causes major physical changes to a young person's

appearance causing rapid aging and disfigurement.¹⁴ Rapid tooth decay known as “meth mouth” is prevalent amongst addicts.¹⁵

Prolonged use or overdose of these drugs can cause loss of coordination, collapse, fever, stroke, heart failure, confusion, convulsions, and even death.¹⁶

Ice use also causes brain damage, mental illness, memory loss, chronic depression, violent, aggressive and irrational behaviour, paranoid psychosis, panic, delusions, hallucinations and contributes to increased transmission of hepatitis and HIV/AIDS.¹⁷

The effects of methamphetamine use can last 6 to 8 hours. Those who use methamphetamines develop an instant tolerance to the drug because the positive feeling it produces is followed by irritability or a state of high agitation and sometimes, violent behaviour.¹⁸ The down side of the high, creates a physical demand for more of the drug to feel normal. As tolerance develops to the euphoric effects, larger and larger doses of the drug are needed to get a pleasurable effect.¹⁹ The user will eventually centre their lives around the drug and will stay awake for days or even weeks, doing little else but smoking or snorting the drug.

Extensive research has indicated that using methamphetamines during pregnancy may result in increased rates of premature delivery, abnormal reflexes and extreme irritability. Congenital deformities have also been linked to this drug use during pregnancy.²⁰ Doctors are now treating babies addicted to the illicit drug Ice. The addiction of the babies occurred because the mother used Ice whilst pregnant and the baby was born with the addiction. Medical treatment of babies addicted to Ice is very difficult as they don't sleep well, feed as well, grow as well, are more difficult to comfort, cry all the time and are irritable.²¹

Even after a person ceases to use methamphetamines, psychotic symptoms can sometimes persist for months or years.²² A leading drug counsellor claims that Ice is the most destructive drug now in circulation.²³

Its widespread use:

Australia is experiencing an epidemic in the drug abuse of "ice", “crystal meths” or methamphetamine. Crystal meth experimentation has become commonplace for socially active young people irrespective of their economic status and social background.²⁴ It is cheap and easy to obtain. At least one in ten Australians tries ice and the number of young users is increasing. There are 102,600 regular Ice users in Australia.²⁵ Of these regular users, three quarters (70,000 +) are dependent users and are flooding the psychiatric units at public hospitals.²⁶ A National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre study found that there were 36,900 regular methamphetamine users in New South Wales.²⁷

The Asia Pacific region has a growing problem with Ice and Ecstasy according to a recent report of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. Thailand and Myanmar reported higher seizures of Ice in a higher purity and a more potent form. Laos and Cambodia reported seizures of Ice for the first time in 2005.²⁸

How it affects the community:

Ice, Speed and Amphetamines are being blamed for a drastic rise in drug affected people attending hospital emergency departments with drug induced psychosis. One major Australian hospital has seen a four fold increase in psychotic episodes in the 10 years between 1994 and 2004. New research published in the Medical Journal of Australia has estimated that illicit drugs are the cause of more than one in every 100 emergency presentations at public hospitals. Most

drug psychosis presentations involved violence with one third of patients requiring sedation to protect other patients, hospital and ambulance personal as well as the general public.²⁹

The Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne now has a special room for violent drug-affected children. The St. Vincent's hospital in Melbourne opened a similar room in 2002. According to a recent survey drugs affect one in five patients placed in the room. Ice and Speed users, including children, are very aggressive, attacking hospital staff and paramedics both physically and verbally. Users are often dysfunctional and psychotic, exhibiting very violent behaviour.^{30,31}

Increasingly, driving accidents and driving fatalities involve drug use. Research indicates that a driver who has recently used an amphetamine-based substance or cannabis is at a similar level of risk of having a car accident as a driver with a Blood Alcohol Content (BAC) above 0.05.³²

Combating the Epidemic:

The common thread with all drug users is that they initially believed that they were mentally strong enough to think that they could "dabble and try" the drug without becoming dependent. Most users of drugs believe that their "conscience" watching over them will know when it's become a problem. Ice is a drug in which your "conscience" also parties with you, and as such, is as altered in its reasoning as your mind when under the influence of methamphetamines.³³

So what can be done to help combat this problem?

1. Develop strong relationships with young people, accepting them and taking an interest in their lives. Help the youth to know that they have value and work at developing resilience in them that will help them in standing against peer pressures and media expectations. Let them know that you care. This is the most important of all strategies.
2. Stay informed and share that information with others. Know what these drugs do and why they are so addictive. Train the youth in why drugs are destructive and encourage them to make wise choices. Children clearly do not know of the dangers of Ice and Speed so we need to promote clear information to them indicating that these drugs are highly addictive.
3. Be alert! Look for signs that could indicate that a young person may be at risk. Methamphetamine users are the hardest to treat of all drug users.³⁴ Be a real friend. You might even save a life. If they are using, encourage them to stop and seek professional help.
4. Because of the increasing demand for Ice at parties, pubs and clubs, a growing number of young Australians are creating a demand for Ice which is funding organized crime. We need to urge the government to take a tough stance on the policing of illicit drugs and continue to fight against the increased trading hours and licensing of pubs and clubs.
5. Medical and ambulance staff are concerned at the increasing drug use, increasing violence and the repeat attendance of drug users at emergency departments. Rather than using scarce health funds at hospitals to handle aggressive repeat drug users we should encourage the government to put in place a system whereby the first incidence identifies drug users and diverts them into detoxification and rehabilitation. We need comprehensive and interlocked programs that rehabilitate users quickly and permanently. This would be an effective way to stop Australians using Ice by reducing the demand.³⁵
6. Drug rehabilitation facilities or substance abuse centres are uncommon in this country.³⁶ Recently, a prominent sportsperson went to America to be treated for drug abuse. We need to urge the government to set up rehabilitation facilities where Australian courts can order identified illicit drug users into detoxification and rehabilitation with the clear intention of

complete freedom from drugs. Now that children are being violently impacted by illicit club drugs, detoxification facilities need to include segregation rooms to protect health workers and other patients.³⁷ Using Australian courts to divert illicit drug users into detoxification and rehabilitation programs will reduce the demand for illicit drugs and cut off funds to criminals.

- Glenda Amos –
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- ³ <http://www.soberliving.com/addictions/methamphetamines.html>
- ⁴ http://www.webinfo-net.com./drug_rehab.htm
- ⁵ <http://www.stopdrugs.org/methamphetamines.html>
- ⁶ http://www.kidshealth.org/kid/grow/drugs_alcohol/know_drugs_meths.html - Robert B. Lembersky, MD Feb. 2006
- ⁷ [http://www.oehha.ca.gov/Methamphetamine Fact Sheet](http://www.oehha.ca.gov/Methamphetamine_Fact_Sheet)
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- ⁹ http://www.freevibe.com/Drug_Facts/meth.asp
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- ³² <http://www.drugsdriving.adf.org.au/>
- ³³ http://www.webinfo-net.com./drug_rehab.htm
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