

HIV Risk Reduction

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Crystal Meth, Men who have sex with Men, and HIV



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Caregivers in addiction clinics and HIV treatment facilities across Georgia are seeing more and more methamphetamine users entering treatment. In metropolitan areas, the population that is arguably most vulnerable to meth use is men who have sex with men (MSM).

Men who had sex with men and used crystal methamphetamine within the last year were five times more likely to test HIV-positive than those who did not use the drug, according to preliminary data collected by the Los Angeles Gay & Lesbian Center. Despite the risk, meth among gay men remains very popular.

We asked Brian Dew, Chairman of the Board of the Atlanta Meth Task Force, to help us understand this potentially lethal intersection of HIV and methamphetamine. With over 15 years of clinical experience in the field of addiction, Dew is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Counseling and Psychological Services at Georgia State Uni-

versity and has recently completed a research project involving MSM meth users in Atlanta.

Dew began with a brief history. In 1960 a powdered form of methamphetamine – known as crank and produced by local mom and pop operations – dominated the market throughout the Southeast. “If you were using meth in Georgia between 1960 and the early 90s, you were typically using crank,” says Dew. At the time, meth labs were found in basements, in the woods, in hotel rooms, in trailers – even in cars. While the home-cooked variety, which is between 30 and 35% pure, can still be found, another form of methamphetamine is now in ascendancy.

“In the late 1990s we started seeing crystal methamphetamine, the crystallized form of the drug, also known as ice,” explains Dew. Long before the meth epidemic, Atlanta was a key destination in the drug trafficking trade. Today it is a primary hub for the distribution of ice, which is typically produced in Mexico, and is between 80 and 90% pure.

Dew and his research team at Georgia State University have traced the origin of ice in Atlanta. “Through interviews we were able to identify that individuals began seeing ice on the scene as early as 1997. The drug was first introduced by dealers who sold it in certain Atlanta gay bars.” Dew also found that men who sleep with men are uniquely vulnerable to meth, particularly crystal meth. Based on a previous study with over 80 abstinent meth users, Dew

(Continued on page 2)

(Continued from page 1)

discovered that one side effect in particular – short and long term memory loss – provides a powerful motivation to use the drug, especially during sex.

Focus group participants reported being stigmatized, stating that they were acutely aware of the negative messages about what it means to be gay. Participants were able to recite a number of such messages. For example: to be gay is to be morally deviant. Other common descriptors included: sinful, shameful, unnatural, and an abomination. With the use of meth, the memory of these painful judgments is erased, at least temporarily. “Many men have told us that when they engaged in sex while high on meth, it was the first time in their lives that they were able to have sex without hearing those messages in their heads. More than one who had been clean for two years said that they couldn’t imagine ever having sex again without the use of meth.”

Beyond memory loss, there are other physical side effects that make the drug appealing. Dew explained that by stimulating the limbic system, meth increases sexual drive and boosts energy levels – and the high can last up to 9 hours. It also delays orgasm so that individuals engage in sexual activity longer in order to climax. Together, these side effects are a recipe for prolonged sexual activity.

The limbic system also activates those parts of the brain that are most responsible for memory and for decision-making. Use of methamphetamine inhibits short and long term memory and reduces rational decision-making. So while under the influence, a gay man who is fully aware of the importance of safe sex may not make the decision to use protection or even recall safe sex messages. “Over and over again,” says Dew, “I’ve interviewed gay men about their use of meth during sex who say, ‘I don’t even think about safe sex; it just doesn’t click for me.’”

Another feature of the drug that poses a risk for users is that over time, meth decreases a man’s ability to retain a full erection. For someone to



People report seeing ice in Georgia as early as 1997. The drug was first introduced by dealers who sold it in gay bars in Atlanta.

perform anal intercourse requires a fairly full erection, says Dew, which long-time users are no longer able to achieve. “So they turn from a more dominant or insertive sexual position to a passive, receptive position.” During anal sex, the receptive partner is at greater risk of a tear in the mucous membranes – which, without protection, puts them at high risk for blood borne infections like HIV. Some MSM are able to continue their role as the insertive sexual partner with the use of erectile enhancing medication. However, such medications can have a dangerous interaction with the meth itself.

A practice that brings a new dimension of risk to the use of crystal is called booty bumping. A popular method of using the drug, booty bumping involves dissolving crystal meth in water and then using a syringe without a needle to insert the solution into the anus. In a sample of 500 MSM, of those who had used meth, “about 30% had taken the drug via booty bumping,” says Dew. “It is especially preferred by those who are receptive anal partners because it numbs the rectum” which in turn allows for greater penetration with its accompanying risk of tearing the rectal tissue. Dew says that some individuals insert ice directly into the anus without mixing it with water, an even more dangerous practice. During sex, the shards of crystal tend to produce cuts or tears in the

(Continued on page 4)

ATLANTA METH TASK FORCE LIFE > METH

Formed nearly three years ago, the Atlanta Meth Task Force has established itself in the gay community. They have produced public forums and conferences, sponsored billboard and ad campaigns, and held screenings of films like *Rock Bottom*, a documentary that follows the stories of seven gay men struggling with meth addiction and recovery. "And we have a very active presence at Pride," says Task Force Board Chairman Brian Dew, PhD. At Pride 2007, the organization hosted a booth where they handed out educational materials containing a phone number to the single point of entry for drug treatment to over 2,000 people. Their slogan this year: *Life is greater than meth*. "I feel positive about what we've been able to do on a shoestring budget," said Dew.

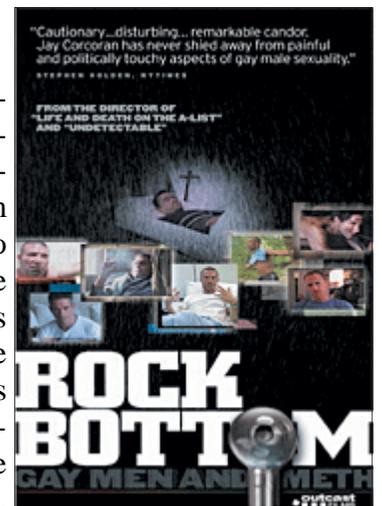
Syphilis Spike Linked to Crystal Meth

After dropping in 2000 to the lowest level ever recorded in the U.S., the rate of syphilis has spiked - especially among gay men. Men who have sex with men accounted for 7 percent of syphilis cases in 2000 but more than 60 percent in 2005, CDC estimates showed. Experts worry the syphilis spike among MSM could place them at higher risk for HIV/AIDS. Syphilis can raise the risk of HIV transmission by an estimated two to five times, said CDC epidemiologist Dr. James Heffelfinger. Joel Ginsberg, executive director of the San Francisco-based Gay and Lesbian Medical Association, reports the increase among a subset of MSM: "those who are having a great deal of sex with multiple partners." Many are HIV-positive or learn they are infected with HIV when diagnosed with syphilis. Use of the drug crystal meth has been associated with unsafe sexual practices linked to syphilis, said Dr. Khalil Ghanem of Johns Hopkins University Medical School. - *CDC News Update*

Educational Film

Rock Bottom is an essential tool for understanding methamphetamine addiction. The film offers a rare look into the private world of the meth addict. It shows the irresistible pleasure of meth use, as well as the devastating consequences that line the path to meth addiction.

Few learning tools are as effective at revealing the addict's experience as this documentary. In addition, the film covers the fundamentals necessary to treat meth addiction, including: how meth is used and how it works in the body; the importance of settings, such as those associated with sexual intercourse, and how these settings become triggers that pull people back into meth use; and meth's relationship to HIV. *Rock Bottom* is an excellent learning tool for a broad range of people, from meth addicts, to people contemplating using meth, to clinicians who treat people that are addicted to the drug.



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DVDs of the documentary are available
from Outcast Films for \$195.

www.outcast-films.com

Methamphetamine & Viagra

While meth increases sexual desire and stamina, it eventually decreases sexual performance. Chronic, heavy use of the drug leads to impotence. Some users report the inability to reach an orgasm at all, despite maintaining arousal for long periods of time.

With the power to reverse the impotence-inducing effects of drugs and alcohol, Viagra inadvertently provided the solution to "crystal dick". When taken together, the dramatic increase in heart rate and blood pressure can lead to cardiac arrest and death.

(Continued from page 2)



Crystal meth or ice

lining of the rectum.

Dew's team has just completed a needs assessment sponsored by the Georgia Department of Human Resources. One question they sought to answer was why meth remains popular among men who have become infected with HIV as a consequence of using the drug. Dew identified two reasons why MSM who are HIV-positive continue to use crystal. The reasons were consistent for most HIV-positive gay men who engage in sexual activity while high on meth, whether they seroconverted before or after they began using the drug. Through several focus groups with MSM who were positive, Dew learned that the drug provided increased energy to engage in sex – overriding the fatigue that accompanies many AIDS drugs – and that they used it as “a stigma management strategy. When they use crystal with others who are also using, their partners don't ask about HIV status. So they perceived there to be less rejection while using meth.”

As compelling as the drug's appeal is, many MSM who have used crystal meth do enter treatment. For clinicians working with meth addicts, it is helpful to understand some of the challenging behaviors common to those detoxing from meth. The after effects of meth linger far longer than those of many other drugs says Dew. “What's difficult with meth users is that after they've stopped using, we see prolonged periods of anxiety, depression, and impairment to short and long term memory. It may take six weeks before they can calm down and retain new information. That's not to say that treatment is not helpful during that time because it provides support and structure. But clinicians need to be aware that it may take someone one or two months before they really begin to clear up from the drug. Anxiety and depression can last much longer – up to nine months for those who have been heavy users.”

For those who are HIV-positive, the problem is

compounded. Dew explains, “These are individuals who have lost hope and are using crystal as a coping resource. Meth addicts who are HIV-positive are generally not consistent with their medication. We interviewed medical professionals who said that many of their gay meth users do great as long as they adhere to their medication but one day they simply disappear. Some may be gone for a year. When they come back, their viral load is through the roof and their T-cell counts are very low.”

In closing, Professor Dew offered this advice for care givers:

Treat the sexual link.

To help clients identify the triggers that can cause relapse, counselors *must* address the sexual link.

Address the shame of being gay.

One of the things that Georgia MSM meth addicts are self-medicating is an underlying sense of shame about what it means to be gay in the South. He suggests that clinicians help clients recognize that meth is only a short term fix and then help them identify resources that can make them feel better about who they are over the long term.

Utilize support.

It's a difficult drug to get off and it takes a lot of support, says Dew. He strongly recommends that counselors utilize anyone who can be supportive in a client's life whether friends, a roommate, or parents. Crystal Meth Anonymous meetings are also appropriate and can be very helpful for some people.

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