

methamphetamine

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(methylamphetamine, meth, crystal meth, speed, ice, Nazi crank, crank, glass, uppers, ya(b)a, shabu shabu)

What is it?

Methamphetamine, or meth is a synthetic stimulant. It is chemically similar to amphetamine but with an extra methyl molecule, hence the prefix meth (or methyl).

As a street drug methamphetamine usually comes as powder (in a wrap), clear-to-white crystals (known as ice or crystal meth) sold in clear bags or in tablet form. The most common names for non-crystal methamphetamine are crank and meth.

Around the world the pills come in many shapes and sizes and can be mistaken for ecstasy. Round, brown or purple pills, some with a butterfly logo have been seized in the UK.

History

Methamphetamine is not a new drug. Synthesised in Japan in 1919 it was often used during World War II as Benzedrine to keep soldiers awake for prolonged periods during combat. In the post-war period Japan in particular experienced significant problems with this drug. Hitler is also said to have been injected daily with

the drug, hence the street name Nazi crank.

In the 1960s, the drug became popular in the US and was banned in 1970. It didn't really appear as a street drug in the UK until the 1980s, when as ice, it surfaced in some urban areas.

Methamphetamine is now cheaply and freely available in the US and Pacific Rim countries like Thailand and Malaysia.

The drug, under the brand name Desoxyn, is available in the US for the treatment of attention deficit disorders. It is not available in the UK.

How is it taken?

The crystal is smoked, in a similar way to crack, though it can be dissolved and injected. The powder is swallowed or snorted as well as injected while pills are swallowed.

Availability and current levels of use

Recent stories of the drug's widespread use abroad and its appearance on the UK dance scene have led to fears of it becoming popular in the UK. However in

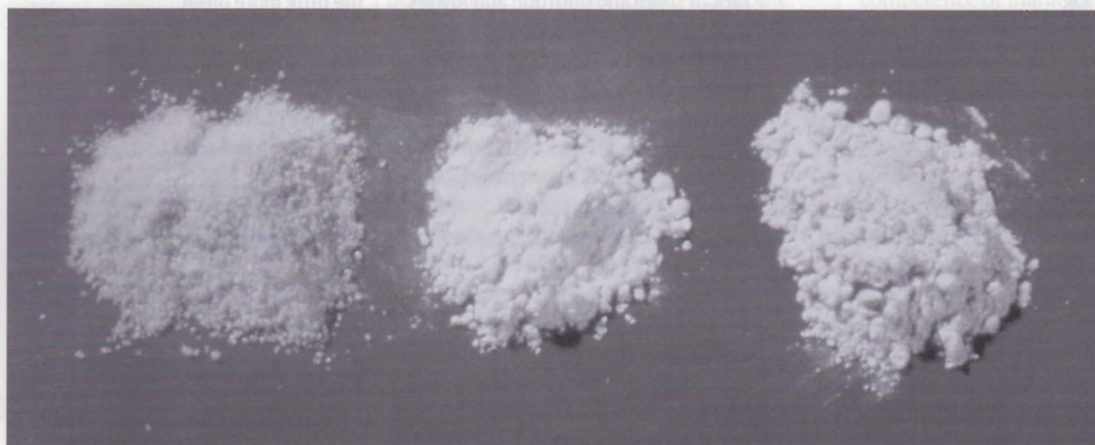
whatever form, methamphetamine is relatively uncommon here. That said, police in areas like Glasgow and Manchester are coming across the powder form a little more often.

Where it is available prices vary depending on the form. Ice sells for between £10 to £25 for a large rock. Pills sell for similar prices as ecstasy, ranging from £3 to £10 while the powder form sells for roughly £10 a gram.

It is possible the profitability of cocaine and the cheapness of ecstasy pills may prevent methamphetamine from becoming a drug regularly sold by dealers and generally sought by users (particularly in the South East where cocaine has a strong market).

There are no official figures on the number of people using methamphetamine and most surveys do not distinguish yet between amphetamine and methamphetamine use.

Only a few 'identification' cases have been reported by the police, but with ecstasy similarly priced and produced using similar shapes and designs, confusion between E and



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the pill form of meth may become more common. The drug is cheap and easy to manufacture. Some is imported from Thailand and Myanmar where large illicit factories are known to operate. Some may also be diverted from Mexican shipments destined for the US. Eastern European countries such as Russia and the Czech republic are also known to be large manufacturers (and consumers) of the drug. There is evidence that the drug is also being manufactured in the Netherlands and Belgium.

The law

Because methamphetamine has no medical use in the UK, there is no legitimate reason for its possession. It is a Class B drug under the Misuse of Drugs Act. Maximum penalties for possession are 5 years imprisonment plus a fine and for supply are 14 years imprisonment and a fine. If any amphetamine type is prepared for injection it becomes a Class A drug and increased penalties apply.

Short-term effects

Like any drug, the method used to take it determines how quickly and how intense the effects will be. If snorted, smoked or injected, the effects are quick and, depending on the dose, can be intense. If swallowed, the effects come on much slower and are less intense.

After an initial rush of energy, the user will feel energised, talkative and very awake. Effects include rapid heartbeats, breathlessness, dilated pupils, dry mouth, increased blood pressure and sweating.

Smoking very pure crystals amplifies the rush, causing a quick and very intense burst of energy, which often can lead to high levels of activity, agitation, sexual desire and paranoia. Like crack, the initial buzz fades quickly, making the user feel edgy and lethargic, despite feeling very awake. Smokers tend to

want more hits to prevent this comedown, often leading to excessive use over long periods (known as a speed run).

In pill form, the effects are not too dissimilar to amphetamine, though the rush may be stronger and the overall hit longer lasting.

Methamphetamine effects can differ from amphetamine in a number of ways. The addition of the methyl molecule allows it to be better absorbed into the body and brain, so its effect can be longer lasting, and some say more intense. An amphetamine trip usually lasts between 6 and 12 hours. For methamphetamine this might be extended to between 8 and 16 hours.

As the effects wear off, the user experiences extreme fatigue, an inability to sleep, mood swings, agitation, anxiety and paranoia.

Long-term effects

Regular methamphetamine use can lead to psychological dependence. Because of the comedown, users are tempted to repeat the dose. Speed runs can last days, even weeks and usually end in collapse through psychological or physical exhaustion. Tolerance also develops with regular use, so more is needed to get the same effect.

Heavy, regular use often leads to lack of sleep and nutrition and lowers resistance to disease. Eating disorders, such as anorexia nervosa, may become a problem. Normal work and domestic routines may be disturbed. Many heavy users become very run down and alternate between periods of feeling good and energetic, then feeling depressed and low.

Delusions, panic attacks, paranoia, feelings of being 'wired' and possibly hallucinations may also follow. Some users experience violent mood swings and can become very aggressive. Dryness of the mouth and repeated

grinding of the teeth can also cause tooth decay and gum disease among heavy users (known as 'meth mouth' in the US).

These long-term effects are common to all stimulants – which include some serious physical problems such as heart attacks, high blood pressure and stroke.

Those who inject the drug run risk of infection and if sharing equipment, of catching blood borne diseases such as hepatitis and HIV. Smokers also risk lung and throat damage.

Increased sexual desire, disinhibition and prolonged sexual activity increase susceptibility to sexually transmitted diseases.

Is methamphetamine more addictive than amphetamine?

Some believe methamphetamine is more addictive and destructive than amphetamine. While it is true the hit is longer lasting, there is no evidence to suggest that it is intrinsically more or less addictive than amphetamine or cocaine. However, in a similar way that crack can be more addictive than cocaine because of the intense and rapid nature of the hit and comedown, so crystal can also be more addictive than crank. But it is all down to the user – reasons why some people will not like the rush, duration and heavy comedown, might be why some other people will want to take the drug more often.

If you have any information on use, prevalence and availability of methamphetamine use please contact Druglink on info@drugscope.org.uk

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What's in a drug?

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