

Everything you ever wanted to know about Methamphetamine, (but were too paranoid to ask...)

Methamphetamine is the active ingredient in speed powder, freebase (base or paste), and crystal meth (rock or ice). It is basically a stronger, longer acting version of the dexamphetamine molecule, (dexies). It's not just in speed- approximately 50% of the Ecstasy pills sold in Australia contain no MDMA, (XTC), but are actually methamphetamine pills.

Meth is a potent psychostimulant, meaning that small amounts have a powerful stimulating effect on your nervous system. The drug has a long-half-life, (about 12 hours), and can be detected in your body fluids for 3 to 4 days. The noticeable effects of methamphetamine tend to wear off long before your blood levels start to drop. This means that bingeing on methamphetamine can lead to increasingly toxic blood levels, even though you don't feel like you're "revving" and even if the effects don't feel as great as the first shot did.

According to analysis of police seizures, most crystal meth is 75-80% pure methamphetamine. Ice or crystal this pure is active in really small amounts- ¼ to ½ a point (25-50mg) is an effective I.V. dose. This makes crystal meth roughly 5-10 times stronger than speed powder and about 4-5 times stronger than most freebase. However, small deals of crystal are often "cut" with Epsom salts, rock salt, or MSM. A 100mg "point" bag you buy might be "pure" (about 85%), or it might be 15mg of speed and 85% Epsom salts. This makes it much harder to judge how much actual speed is in any dose you buy, and also much easier to accidentally take more than you need...

Obviously people take speed to feel good. But if you take too much in one go, or take it too frequently, speed can make you feel pretty bad. Because of the high potency of crystal meth, and its long life in the body, it's much easier to take too much by accident than with base or powder speed. It's also much more "habit-forming".

Most people find that once their body becomes accustomed to taking methamphetamine regularly, they feel extremely tired, have little enthusiasm, and get cranky easily when they go without speed. Over the last several years, problems with speed dependence (addiction), speed overdose, and methamphetamine-induced psychosis have become increasingly common in WA.

What is "speed-psychosis"?

Psychosis occurs when the brain is over-stimulated. To understand how meth can cause this we need to look at how amphetamines work. A small dose of speed makes your brain work faster and more efficiently. That's one of the reasons why it's a performance enhancing drug. However a large dose can make your brain work *too* fast. This definitely doesn't enhance performance.

When people are heavily intoxicated with speed they can "loop out". If this happens to you, your brain cannot process information normally. You may perceive things or situations inaccurately, you may become obsessed with one subject of conversation, or you may leap to conclusions or think things are true that you normally wouldn't.

People in this state may develop odd beliefs or complex conspiracy theories, think strangers are persecuting them, or spend hours concentrating intensely on a repetitive task. They may bore their friends by telling the same stories over and over, or may act more agro than usual. These are common side-effects of heavy speed use. They happen because your brain is over-stimulated, or because your brain is exhausted.

In large doses, or if used for prolonged periods of time, methamphetamine can cause hallucinations, delusions (false beliefs), and extreme paranoia. This is true methamphetamine-psychosis. Someone suffering from a methamphetamine-induced psychosis behaves in a very similar way to someone experiencing a psychotic episode caused by schizophrenia. Unlike schizophrenia however, methamphetamine psychosis usually gets better once the speed starts to wear off. Most people start to recover within 48

hours, although serious cases, especially if caused by long-term heavy use, can take a few weeks or longer to settle down. In some cases, people may never return from loopyland.

Emergency departments are reporting that methamphetamine psychosis is becoming an increasingly common problem. Treatment for psychosis usually consists of a strong sedative or antipsychotic injection. Because the symptoms of methamphetamine psychosis closely resemble a psychotic mental illness, Doctors may want to keep the patient in hospital for observation overnight, or refer them to Mental Health services for assessment.

Any other bad news?

In addition to stimulating your brain, stimulants such as methamphetamine rev your body up. Speed in functional doses keeps you awake and increases endurance, by releasing adrenalin and stimulating the body's internal emergency system, (the "fight-or-flight" response). This is the other way in which amphetamines can enhance performance. However higher doses can release too much adrenalin. This sometimes dangerously over-stimulates the heart, or can precipitate a stroke.

More commonly, over-revving can cause intense panic attacks. Too much adrenalin makes you sweat, makes your heart race, your mouth dry, and makes you feel sick in the stomach. It can also cause you to over-react to any stress, or to speak to other people more aggressively than you think you are. If you experience these sorts of effects often, using smaller doses may be worth trying.

Using regularly reduces the physical effects of speed, due in part to tolerance, but mainly because it burns up your body's reserves of energy and vitamins, (by making your body work harder while making you eat and sleep less). Some of the psychological symptoms listed above can be caused by exhaustion, dehydration and malnutrition. If you are "fried" it may be that you have starved your brain for so long that it just can't work properly. If you have lots of problems with concentration and memory, or persistent skin infections, or sores that take ages to heal, this may indicate that you are badly malnourished and over-tired and it might be a good idea to have break from speed, get plenty of rest and eat well for a couple of weeks.

How can you tell if someone is "at risk of psychosis"?

An acute psychotic episode can start suddenly out-of-the-blue, for example after taking a single dose of methamphetamine, (especially if it's a larger amount than usual). However, low-level signs of psychosis can also appear slowly over a long period of use and then flare up as acute psychosis in response to things like emotional stress or conflict. Some of these early warning signs are pretty commonly experienced by people who take speed regularly but, if these symptoms cause you or people around you problems, and especially if they worsen, then it might be an idea to do something about it. Some of these early warning signs might include: difficulty concentrating, difficulty thinking clearly or remembering, concentrating obsessively on one activity for a long time, depression, anxiety, mood swings, irritability, and outbursts of anger.

How much is too much?

If you are experiencing any of these symptoms, or feel exhausted and/or vague all the time, it may be because you are taking too much whiz, taking it too often, or both. If you use speed regularly, remember that the energy and enthusiasm you get from it doesn't come out of the crystal, it comes out of your body. If there are no reserves left in your body, more speed won't give you much of a rush and often just makes you feel awake but incredibly vague.

The US Military has tested all sorts of performance-enhancing drugs. Their research showed that methamphetamine greatly increased stamina and alertness, and reduced response time and fatigue. However, after three days on regular doses of meth, most test subjects were more stimulated by a single dose of caffeine than by more speed. These were fit young soldiers, but their brains and bodies had simply run out of fuel. If you are very fried, more speed doesn't usually help that much. Water, food and rest are needed to relieve the

symptoms, and a short break from the speed will not only help rebuild your reserves, but also usually makes your next shot a lot more rewarding.

Tips for making these problems less likely.

- If you use crystal meth, try using the smallest amount you can - don't underestimate how strong it is. If you use regularly, try to use a consistent dose. If you let your level of use escalate, you will quickly develop a tolerance to the effects. This means you can still be frying your brain, but not really feel like you're speeding at all.
- Try to find a reliable, consistent source. If the gear is different, or comes from someone you don't know that well, try a tiny tester before you have the whole deal.
- If you have been caning it for a while, and a dose that would normally give you a rush has little or no effect, you have probably run your reserves down too far. Taking larger doses won't make you feel better. It will just make you fry for longer. Take a break. Just one good meal and one nights rest can make a huge difference.
- If you are experiencing a racing pulse, super dry mouth, upset stomach or you are sweating heavily under the arms, you may have had a little too much. People often vomit or dry-retch after a shot that's a bit too big. Don't take more on top of a dose that affects you like this. Try taking a smaller amount next time.
- Your environment is important. Try to use speed in a setting where it's fun, not stressful. You are much less likely to have psychological problems if you use with other people, or have cool people to hang out with while you are speeding. You are much more likely to have problems if you spend hours speeding or coming down all on your lone-some.
- If you have been diagnosed with a psychotic disorder, and particularly if you have been diagnosed with schizophrenia, you will probably find that methamphetamine makes an episode more likely, and makes your symptoms worse. You are probably best advised not to take speed.
- If you use regularly, look after your body. Make sure you eat something every day. Ideally, try to eat some fresh fruit and vegetables every day. These are the raw materials your body needs. Pay attention to how much water you drink. Even if you don't always sleep, make sure you spend some time resting every night.

What can you do if you start to experience a panic attack or psychosis?

- Remind yourself that you are on speed, and may be experiencing bizarre or exaggerated thoughts. Try not to react too strongly.
- Breathe evenly and deeply and try to remain calm. Concentrating on controlling your breathing often helps overcome anxiety and can slow a racing heartbeat.
- Try not to get into an argument while revving or coming down. You may say or do something you will regret later. This is especially important for couples who use together. Remind yourself that the way you feel is a side-effect of the drug, and the drug will wear off.
- If you know people who are safe and won't freak out at you looping, go find them. If you are at a venue, find the "chill-out" space.

What can you do if someone with you experiences psychosis?

- Stay calm! Methamphetamine-induced psychosis is an extremely frightening experience in which a person becomes removed from reality. Someone experiencing psychosis doesn't usually realise what is happening. They may be talking nonsense, and they may react to things, or even talk to people, who aren't there. Telling them they are imagining things probably won't help. Because they are likely to panic, people experiencing psychosis can become extremely frightened, irrational, aggressive, and sometimes violent. How you react will affect how the person behaves.
- Stay cool! When a person is experiencing acute psychosis, they may be fixed in their beliefs. Try not to get into a lengthy argument, but listen to them to get an understanding of the emotions they are experiencing. You listening without freaking out will often calm the person down heaps. If possible, offer them some water, juice, or food. This often helps.

- Avoid confrontational situations - for example sit beside the person instead of in front of them. If there are people around who are making things worse, ask them to leave you alone or move yourself and the person away from them.
- Talk in a clear, simple manner and repeat yourself if you need to.
- Limit the amount of stimulation - eg: keep the number of people to a minimum and reduce the surrounding noise. If the person is in a club or on the street, try to move to a calmer, safer environment. If you are at someone's house, turn off the telly, (especially if the person is having a conversation with it).
- If these steps have calmed the person down, but they are still obviously speeding, don't leave them alone any longer than is necessary. It may only take a few minutes alone for them to wind themselves back up again.
- If you are concerned about anyone's safety, or are worried that the person is at serious risk, call an ambulance. Be aware that police will usually attend, and may transport the person to hospital. Also, be aware that the person will probably have to spend 24 hours at the hospital. Serious cases will probably be taken to the nearest mental health clinic or psychiatric hospital. Most people admitted to the psychiatric hospital with methamphetamine-induced psychosis are released within two weeks.

Finally, if you, or one of your mates, are experiencing problems associated with speed use, and you want some user-friendly advice, give WASUA a call. If you decide to stop taking speed, or if you just want to reduce your use or take a break for a while, WASUA can help with advice. If changing your drug use proves difficult, WASUA can refer you to other services that may be able to help.