

Crisis Among Gay Men: Crystal Methamphetamine Use Linked to Rising HIV and STD Rates

The National Alliance of State and Territorial AIDS Directors (NASTAD) and the National Coalition of STD Directors (NCS D) are concerned about a burgeoning public health crisis. Crystal methamphetamine (meth) remains extremely cheap, simple to manufacture, and easy to obtain. This drug is affecting populations nationwide—causing a broad and negative impact on public health. While we recognize that many populations are engaging in crystal meth use, recent evidence suggests that its use is contributing significantly to increases in risky sex and higher rates of HIV transmission and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) among gay men and other men who have sex with men (MSM).

Crystal meth users report that the physical effects of the drug increases their feelings of self-esteem, confidence, sexual pleasure, and invulnerability. These emotions greatly lower inhibitions and often lead to unsafe sex practices. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), in collaboration with the San Francisco Department of Public Health, concludes that men reporting crystal meth use were more likely than non-users to be infected with HIV or other STDs. Compared to non-users, crystal meth users were more than twice as likely to be HIV infected, 1.7 times more likely to test positive for gonorrhea, 1.9 times more likely to test positive for chlamydia and 4.9 times more likely to be diagnosed with syphilis. Crystal meth users also reported a median of four sexual partners over the four-week period prior to a clinic visit compared to two partners reported by non-users. This study suggests that

meth use plays an important role in the transmission of HIV and STDs.

Additional data collected by the Center for HIV/AIDS Education Studies and Training (CHEST) at New York University indicate that in New York City, MSM who use crystal meth are three times more likely to contract HIV through receptive anal intercourse than MSM who do not use the drug. Moreover, the CHEST study found that among gay or bisexual male party/club drug users, approximately 62% of the participants indicated significant and frequent use of crystal meth. This is an increase from the early 1990s when usage rates among gay and bisexual men ranged between 5% and 25%. CHEST also found that MSM who reported crystal meth use were diverse in terms of ethnicity, age, income and HIV status; 45% of the samples were men of color. In terms of HIV status, half the men using crystal meth reported being HIV positive.

The use of crystal meth and other drugs also affects the ability of persons living with HIV infection to adhere to antiretroviral therapy, likely resulting in increased viral loads and possible susceptibility to illness. Adherence failures ultimately cause increases in viral replication and an increased potential for transmission of the virus, as well as drug resistant mutated strains of HIV. Research also strongly suggests that the drug can adversely interact with HIV medications and possibly even cause death.

Lack of funding and coordination at the governmental and private sector levels are severely hampering efforts to address methamphetamine use and its catastrophic public health consequences. A coordinated public health response is urgently needed to more effectively address this issue. NASTAD and NCSD recommend and will work towards implementation of the following action steps:

1. Collaborate with the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to develop a coordinated national strategy for addressing crystal meth use among gay men. Development of the national response would include CDC, the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), the National Institutes of Health (NIH) and representatives of public health entities, substance abuse treatment providers, as well as gay and minority community organizations.
2. Fund research to determine the most effective behavioral, community-level, policy and biomedical interventions. In addition, facilitate collaboration among health departments, federal agencies, and community planning groups to improve the dissemination of research and public information regarding the connection between the use of crystal meth and unsafe sexual behaviors that may result in STD and HIV infections.
3. Assist CDC and other partners in assessing local and state-based surveillance and program development technical assistance needs.
4. Identify mechanisms for disseminating information to targeted groups of MSM throughout the United States. Promote ongoing efforts and natural experiments aimed at calling attention to the harm that crystal meth use is causing among MSM.
5. Encourage partnerships between health departments and commercial sex venues (sex clubs, bathhouses, circuit parties), as well as internet service providers to address the use of crystal meth and to reduce its harmful effects.
6. Collaborate with the criminal justice system to increase effectiveness in responding to and averting the crystal meth crisis. Law enforcement agencies cannot adequately respond to this problem without understanding the context of crystal meth use among gay male/MSM populations and its broader public health implications.
7. Utilize the Prevention Training Centers and AIDS Education Training Centers to develop and improve provider education on the role of crystal meth.
8. Encourage SAMHSA and state substance abuse drug agencies to improve substance abuse treatment services for those who use crystal meth and to increase the availability of treatment slots.

A strong, comprehensive response by national, state, and local community leaders, organizations, non-governmental agencies and governments is essential to combat the increases in crystal meth use among gay men/MSM and its enduring consequences. NASTAD and NCSD are committed to working together to address this important public health issue. We encourage our members, federal partners, and lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender, and other community organizations to work together at the local level to assess the role of crystal meth in HIV and STD prevention and to consider these recommendations to address this important public health issue.

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