



In recent years, methamphetamine -also known as "meth," "crank," "speed," or "ice" has become perhaps the biggest drug problem in North America. It is a powerful and highly addictive stimulant that affects the central nervous system. The drug is produced and sold as pills, capsules or powder that can be smoked, snorted, injected or swallowed.

Frequent use of meth does a great deal of damage to the body. Its use can result in dependence and addiction, psychosis, stroke, dangerously high body temperature and heart problems. Withdrawal from the drug often results in severe depression and paranoia.

Two of the biggest side effects of meth use are appetite suppression and sleep deprivation. Addicts can go for days without eating, and for days, or even weeks, without sleeping. Normal human behaviour is suppressed, and the only thing they are interested in is getting their next hit. Long-term users often have meth mouth - a condition where their teeth fall out. Open sores and tic & tremors are some of the other problems associated with the drug. Most meth users look a lot older than their biological age because of the terrible toll the drug exacts on their bodies. After months or years of eating next to nothing, they are reduced to skin and bones and look like survivors of a concentration camp.

One of the things that makes meth so dangerous is its availability relative to other drugs. Heroin is derived from poppies grown in Asia, while cocaine is derived from coca plants in South America. Both of these products have to be refined and transported long distances before reaching the streets of North America, and that limits the quantities available and keeps prices quite high. But meth is created from ingredients that are commonly found in this part of the world. As a result, the drug is readily available and relatively cheap. Most of the meth used in North America is produced in large commercial labs run by organized crime rings. But quite a bit of the drug is also produced by meth "cooks" working out of their own homes or garages. During the peak of the meth craze, police in the United States discovered 15,000 home labs in one year - and those were just the ones they knew about!

**Looking out
for our
communities!**

Law enforcement officials and the pharmacy industry worried that home-based meth labs springing up across the United States would soon become a serious problem in Canada. The Meth Watch program was created in 2004 to cope with this issue proactively by identifying and dealing with people who were purchasing ingredients used to make crystal meth in their homes. Community Drug Alert recently spoke with Gerry Harrington of NDMAC, an association that represents retailers in the self-care health products industry. He tells us that "at present, there are relatively few meth labs in Canada - it never turned into as big a problem as it has been in the United States. But the fact that there are so few labs here is part of a two-edged sword. People aren't making it in their homes because there is so much product from commercial labs available on the street."

There is a big difference between home labs and commercial labs. Gangs that are running commercial labs are smuggling in huge quantities of ephedrine to make their product, and the crystal meth they sell is typically about 80% pure. Home labs are typically run by addicts themselves - and they are usually making the product for their own use.



Dangers of Home Labs

We've already touched on some of the dangers associated with crystal meth but the problems associated with home-based meth labs are even more serious. Paint thinner and drain cleaner are just a couple of the ingredients used in small scale production of meth, and these products are definitely not designed for human consumption. There's no telling how much of these ingredients end up in the final product. The toxic stew that is the by-product of meth production is extremely harmful to anyone living in the home, particularly if there are young children around.

Poisonous gas known as phosgene is a side effect of a reaction gone bad, and many meth cooks have died as a result of this gas. Phosgene was found in the mustard gas used to poison soldiers in WWI, and inhaling this gas is a horrible way to die. Explosions and fires are one of the other risks associated with meth labs. Twenty percent of the meth labs busted in the United States were discovered by fire departments after the homes burned down!

Retailers & the Meth Watch Program

Retailers who take part in the Meth Watch program have decals prominently displayed on their premises. Gerry notes that "we find there is a lot of value in sending out the warnings in advance. When addicts see that decal displayed in the front door, they know that pharmacists and clerks are going to be extremely diligent about what they are selling. We are playing to one of the unfortunate side-effects of meth addiction: paranoia. Addicts aren't going to buy at a store if they know they are being watched. We also ensure that products containing ephedrine are placed in an area of the store where they can be easily monitored."

Employees are taught to recognize suspicious purchases and report them to law enforcement officials by notifying local police or calling a toll free number. What exactly is a suspicious purchase? Gerry notes that "anybody walking out with more than a couple of packages containing pseudo-ephedrine is going to catch the attention of the pharmacists. This is partly because of the Meth Watch program, but it is also related to the fact that pharmacists are trained to be on the lookout for unusually large purchases of any medication. It's possible that a customer is buying large quantities of cold medicine to deal with sinus congestion. The pharmacist will automatically ask questions about what the product is being used for because they might want to direct customers to alternatives that are more effective and have fewer side effects."



Another suspicious purchase occurs when in addition to ephedrine or pseudoephedrine, customers purchase some of the other products that go into creating crystal meth, including:

- Iodine
- Rubbing Alcohol
- Starter fluid
- Gas additives
- Drain cleaner
- Lithium batteries
- Rock salt
- Matchbooks (red phosphorus)
- Lye
- Paint thinner
- Aluminum foil
- Glassware
- Coffee filters
- Propane tanks

Some addicts are brazen enough to purchase all of these products at once, while others may buy (or steal) these products from different stores. Still other addicts will get young children to make the purchases for them because they feel that kids will arouse less suspicion.

Staff at drugstores are trained to recognize the characteristics of meth addicts who are purchasing ingredients for a home lab. These characteristics include a dishevelled appearance and very nervous and edgy behaviour. In extreme cases, the addicts may also have meth mouth, open sores and severe tics.

What should pharmacists and clerks do if they have customers making a suspicious purchase? Well, the one thing they should not do is to start a confrontation with that person in the store. Gerry points out that "the person making the purchase is likely a meth addict, and they are very unstable in that state."

Staff should carry out selling the products as usual, but just make a note of what the customer was wearing, what they looked like and how they paid for the merchandise. They can then pass this information on to the RCMP or to local law enforcement officials. Gerry adds that "it takes a lot of cold medicine to make even a small batch of crystal meth, so chances are the addicts are making purchases at several different stores. If staff at the different pharmacies are forwarding information to the police, that is going to make it a lot easier for them to track down the meth lab where the product is being created."



Community Support

Community involvement has been very important in helping to promote the Meth Watch program. There was an incident in Stratford, Ontario a while ago where a number of meth labs popped up in the community. When residents of the city realized how devastating these meth labs were to their neighbourhood, they sprang into action and got behind the Meth Watch program in a big way. Gerry says that "when you have friends and neighbours coming in, bringing a kit from Meth Watch, and encouraging pharmacists throughout the community to get involved, it has a really big impact. We had every pharmacist in Stratford on board within two weeks, and the problem with the meth labs soon disappeared. There is simply no substitute for community action when it comes to dealing with these issues."

Dealing With Demand

Why are so many addicts using Meth? Because they feel the drug answers their needs. If users are feeling hungry, they simply need to take some meth to curb their appetite. If they are worried about being picked up by the police or rival gangs, meth helps to keep them hyper vigilant. But while it might meet their needs over the short run, the drug is killing them over the long run. Food and sleep are absolutely essential to human survival, and nobody can expect to survive very long without them. Thousands of meth addicts die each year from overdoses, strokes, and from dozens of other health issues related to their drug use.

The best way to deal with this issue is to ensure that the next generation doesn't get caught up in the same vicious cycle. Gerry points out that "if we don't do something about the demand for the drug, we will never solve the problem. It always comes down to education, awareness, treatment and prevention. Kids can be the best police of their own generation - we've just got to quit underestimating their intelligence. If they are allowed to show leadership and have a rational and educated discussion about this issue, I think they can be counted on to make the right choices."



During the 1970's, the phrase '*speed kills*' was very common among youth. They may have used alcohol, or drugs like marijuana, but most of them avoided methamphetamine because they understood the terrible risks associated with this substance. People who used methamphetamine were very low on the social totem pole - it was like they were the 'trailer trash' of their generation. Youth of the 21st century need to come to the same realization about meth. There's nothing glamorous about the horrible physical and psychological damage the drug inflicts on addicts!