

AIDS Foundation

OF CHICAGO

Community Talking Points: Crystal Methamphetamine, Gay Men, and HIV/AIDS

What is crystal?

- Crystal meth is a stimulant that triggers pleasure centers in the brain normally activated by the neurotransmitters norepinephrine and dopamine. During the 8-12 hours that crystal is active in a person's system, he may experience increased alertness, decreased fatigue, lowered inhibitions, increased sex drive, and feelings of power, confidence and invulnerability.
- Crystal meth can be found as a white, yellowish or reddish powder, a waxy solid (glass) or a clear rock (ice).
- It is commonly called Tina, Crissy, crystal, bump, speed, or tweak.

Who is using crystal?

- In Chicago, as with other urban areas, the population most impacted by crystal use appears to be gay men. In suburban and rural areas across the country and in Illinois, the use of crystal tends to be among heterosexual, blue-collar individuals.
- Approximately 1 in 10 Chicago gay men reported using crystal meth at least once in the past year, compared to 7 out of 1,000 adult males nationwide. **In other words, 90% of gay men in Chicago are not using crystal.**
- About 20% of those who have used crystal in the past year are frequent users (using at least once a week).
- Crystal use is most prevalent among gay men over the age of 30. Most of these men (94%) self-identify as gay.

What is the connection between crystal and HIV and STDs?

- Crystal intoxication can result in risky sexual behavior.
- Crystal users in Chicago reported having over twice as many sex partners in the past year as men who reported not using crystal during the same period.
- Crystal users in Chicago reported engaging in unprotected receptive anal sex 3 times as often as men who have not used crystal in the past year.
- Physiological changes resulting from crystal use may increase infectivity (e.g., erosion of normal protective epithelial layer in the rectum.)
- In Los Angeles in 2004, 30.2% of gay male clients who tested positive for HIV reported using crystal meth, up from 11.7% in 2001.

Across the Spectrum: Messages for Gay Men

If you don't use crystal, don't start.

- Tina plays rough. Crystal meth is highly addictive and drug dependency can develop quickly, even if you think you can control your use. Recovering from a crystal addiction is more difficult than heroin.
- Using crystal regularly can lead to tooth loss, undesirable weight loss, paranoia, brain damage, and impotence. You may lose your job, money, your home and relationships because of crystal. It also impairs sexual choices and greatly increases your risk of acquiring or transmitting HIV or other STDs.
- You can have a great, satisfying sex life without crystal. Most gay men do.

If you do use, seek assistance to reduce or stop use, and get tested for HIV and STDs every three months.

If stopping isn't an option, act consistently to reduce your sexual risk and protect your general well-being as described below.

Before you get high:

- Plan for sexual safety. Decide how and with whom you want to have sex. Make a commitment to disclose/ask about HIV/STD status and use condoms once you're high.
- Plan your use ahead of time, with a clear start and stop time, so you don't miss work or other obligations, spend more money than you intended, or do other things you may regret.
- Remember to brush and floss your teeth every day.

While you are high:

- Stay hydrated, drink water or Gatorade.
- Keep your body nourished. Try protein bars and Ensure if you don't feel like eating a full meal.
- Change condoms every hour and with each sex partner & use plenty of water-based lubricant.
- Avoid using other drugs (Viagra, poppers, Ecstasy) and keistering ("booty bumping")

Injecting Crystal:

- If you don't inject, don't start. Injecting greatly increases your chances of HIV, STDs, hepatitis C, abscesses, other soft tissue infections, and social/sexual rejection.
- If you do inject, use a new, sterile syringe (available at needle exchanges or pharmacies) every time you inject.
- Do not share syringes, cookers, or other paraphernalia with other users or sex partners.
- If sterile needles are not available, soaking needles in bleach can kill HIV – but not Hepatitis B or C.

HIV-positive men and crystal use

- Research shows that using crystal meth often leads to higher viral loads, faster HIV progression, worsened immune function, and increased neurological damage.

- Using crystal does NOT increase T-cells or boost your immune system. These are myths.
 - Crystal can have bad interactions with many HIV medications.
 - While you're high on crystal, you may forget to take your meds or follow food and water guidelines.
 - Be honest with your doctor about your drug use.
 - Crystal use is not the answer to feelings of shame, anger, fear, loneliness, or depression.
 - Gaining peer support from other HIV-positive people and service organizations can help ease anxieties that frequently affect people living with HIV/AIDS.
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Sources:

Deconstructing Tina: A Compendium Guide to Crystal Meth Education and Support for Gay Men.

Chicago HIV Behavioral Surveillance, Office of HIV/AIDS Surveillance, Chicago Department of Public Health, 2004. Data is based on 1,251 interviews.

Amezola De Herrera, Paula. Amphetamine ('meth') Use Trends at the Los Angeles Gay & Lesbian Center's HIV Counseling and Testing Program from 2001 to 2004. Data is based on examination of 19,701 client records at the LA Center from 2001 to 2004.