

Crystal meth lacing other street drugs

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You might not even know you are on crystal meth.

You might swear that you would never, ever take the stuff because in the hierarchy of street drugs, crystal meth is about as low as it gets. It hooks you the first time. It rots your teeth. It feels like it puts bugs under your skin. You claw your own flesh trying to get them out. It makes you angry. Aggressive. You might have seizures. You stop sleeping and eating.

So you would never do meth. Speed. Ice. Crank. Whatever name you want to use for it.

Problem is, that tablet of ecstasy you took at the party?

It was laced with crystal meth.

For at least five years, police and addiction experts in Hamilton have been warning crystal meth was coming.

Well, now it's here.

The largest bust of street-ready crystal meth in Canadian history — worth \$3 million — was spearheaded by Hamilton police. Some 26 kilograms of the nearly pure stimulant was seized during predawn raids at 23 homes in Hamilton, Halton, Niagara, Peel, Haldimand County and Sudbury. Search warrants for Project Newton were executed with the support of 175 officers from nine police agencies.

Police laid drug charges against 21 people, including nine from Hamilton. Charges include six counts of conspiracy to traffic methamphetamine, two counts of possession for the purpose of trafficking meth and six counts of trafficking meth.

While the amount of crystal meth in Hamilton pales in comparison to crack or cocaine, it has been quietly creeping onto our streets. Its arrival has been so insidious that many of its users don't even know they've taken it.

"It's used to lace other drugs," says Debbie Bang, manager of Womankind Addiction Service at St. Joseph's hospital. "It is a strategy to have people purchase from you again."

Once you get used to the high from something laced with crystal meth, everything else will pale by comparison. So you'll go back to the same dealer that sold you the drugs that really sent you soaring.

"We don't see a lot of crystal meth use as a substance by itself," says Bang. It is either knowingly used along with other drugs or used unknowingly through lacing. Every now and then Womankind will get a "blip" of clients who have taken drugs laced with meth and are experiencing very bad withdrawal symptoms.

A repeat meth user is not hard to spot.

"The effects on the body are not nice," says Bang.

One client asked Bang to look closely at her face. She was convinced she had walked through a screen door and that pieces of wire were embedded in her face. She was picking at her skin trying to dislodge the phantom screen.

Bang also says women who do realize they have taken crystal meth might be reluctant to admit it because it is "socially unacceptable" — even on the street — to take such a nasty drug.

At Wayside House, an addiction service for men, executive director Regan Anderson says he once had a client who admitted smoking pot, but couldn't explain his deterioration in health and strange behaviour. Eventually he wound up in the ER at St. Joseph's hospital with symptoms that presented like schizophrenia. He was hallucinating and paranoid.

What he actually had was an addiction to the crystal meth his pot dealer was using to lace his marijuana.

Not many clients identify crystal meth as their primary addiction, says Anderson. But it might be third or fourth on their list, usually after crack and alcohol.

Since crystal meth is cooked in home labs, it is impossible to know the dose or purity you are using, says Anderson, which makes it very dangerous.

As well, when you are on meth "you lose all inhibition. You're the brightest, strongest, best looking person on the planet. You're omnipotent."

At the same time, it can increase sex drive. The result is users "throw all caution to the wind" and engage in unsafe sex, which can transmit hepatitis C, HIV and other diseases.

Criminal lawyer Beth Bromberg has had only a few clients who have used crystal meth. And at least one of them didn't even realize it.

"I have bugs crawling under my skin," the woman told Bromberg. But it wasn't until toxicology results showed crystal meth in her system that the woman realized the ecstasy she had taken was laced with it.

Crystal meth is made with pseudoephedrine and ephedrine: two common ingredients in cold medicine.

Leslie Chappell, president of the Hamilton and District Pharmacists' Association, says while there is legislation that makes it mandatory to keep medicine with high levels of those ingredients behind the counter, the brands with lower dosages can be kept on regular shelves.

While some staff might intervene if a customer tries to purchase huge quantities of the medicine, others might not have been trained to do so.

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