

Methamphetamine—also known as meth, crystal, Tina, ice, crank or speed—is the gay community's hottest, most trendy drug du jour. Meth comes in a white powdered form, in a crystalline, chunky form and in pill form. It can be smoked or injected, swallowed, snorted or taken up the butt. Vein injection and smoking are the quickest—some say strongest—high.

"In the last three or four years," reports Sgt. Eric Schober of Portland Police Bureau's Drugs and Vice Division, "we've seen smoking meth taking off around here. And we've seen ice coming into Portland recently as well. If you look at ice closely, it looks like long shards. It's pure crystal meth."

Meth is a synthetic chemical related to its parent drug, amphetamine. Its primary ingredient, ephedrine or pseudoephedrine, is a common ingredient found in over-the-counter cold medications. That ingredient is altered chemically by "cooking" it with such nasties as pure ammonia, red phosphorous, battery acid, drain cleaners and lye. Meth's made with some of the most toxic, combustible materials around. Just cooking the stuff, let alone putting it in your body, is an environmental nightmare.

Old-style meth was cooked with an easy-to-obtain amino acid named phenylalanine or one of its chemical cousins. The cooking process smelled like cat pee. "This old-style meth is making a big comeback in Portland," claims Schober. "We think it might be because the old cooks are being released from jail and they are cooking it the way they know how. Users like this kind of crank because it's not as harsh as, say, the red phosphorous stuff."

Meth works by breaking through the brain-blood barrier, a soft fatty layer of protection around your brain, and by encouraging the release of our natural neurotransmitters—dopamine, serotonin and norepinephrine—as well as the release of our danger-receptor, adrenaline. The neurotransmitters send signals to the brain, creating an immensely pleasurable rush that can last 12 to 20 hours. Meth also sends mixed signals to the brain causing the user to stay awake for hours or even days. It tells the body to go full-gear, which is known among users as "tweaking," a state of enormous excitement and

energy level that is further affected by the flood of adrenaline the drug releases.

"Meth's an 18-hour high compared to cocaine's 60 to 90 minutes," says Schober.

"Meth is cocaine with legs," adds Val Lawson, a counselor with ASAP Treatment Service. "It's a poor man's high."

Gay, bi and other men who have sex with men (MSM, as health service workers refer to us) are attracted to meth for many reasons, the biggest of which is sex. For many meth users, the drug prolongs sexual stamina to Herculean levels, helps break down sexual barriers, prolongs erections and intensifies orgasms.

"My sex life is amazing," Wade crows. "I'm getting laid a lot, and I get to live out my fantasies. When I use, it's all about getting laid. I lower my standards. I get on chat lines and beg for things I don't like to admit to. I search for orgies and the sexual extreme. I get into toys and porn. It's a side of me that only comes out when I'm high."

But meth doesn't always help sex. A condition known as "crystal dick" renders some users unable to get hard while others can stay hard but are unable to climax.

Many MSM and lesbians also use meth to stay awake all night dancing or partying. In Portland, meth use at circuit parties, dances and clubs is common. Some use meth to overcome shyness, to help with feelings of depression and boredom, to fight HIV- or AIDS-related fatigue or to self-medicate attention deficit/hyperactivity disorders. Some MSM and lesbians use meth to go on housecleaning binges or to lose weight.

"There's always been meth in Portland's gay community," says Lawson. "The drug of choice comes and goes in waves. Right now it's definitely meth. At parties in Portland, it's like cocaine used to be. Meth is laid out like an hors d'oeuvre."

Lawson is the counselor who created and leads ASAP Treatment Service's Triangle Project, Oregon's only comprehensive treatment program specifically designed for the sexual minorities community.

"Most gay men are attracted to meth because of sex," Lawson says. "I think a lot of lesbian

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Basic meth

What meth is: an illegal synthetic stimulant that works directly on the central nervous system

What meth looks like: clear or white powder or crystals; odorless; ingredients can alter to a brown or tea color or add black specks; also a small, brightly colored pill called Yaba

What meth's made of: primarily ephedrine or pseudoephedrine (found in most common, over-the-counter asthma or cold medications); red phosphorous, ammonia or the amino acid phenylalanine; cut with drain cleaners, battery acid, lye, lantern fuel or antifreeze

What meth does: an initial, orgasmically pleasurable rush followed by a euphoric high; lasts from 12 to 20 hours; feelings of sexual potency, intense concentration, high physical activity, extreme wakefulness and chattiness

How meth does it: breaches the blood-brain barrier, releasing stores of adrenaline; changes the output of brain neurotransmitters, including dopamine (reward and pleasure activator), serotonin (sleep and sensory perception activator) and norepinephrine (alertness and concentration activator)

What meth's called: meth, crystal, crystal meth, go, tweak, crank, ice, Tina, T, speed

Who does meth: everyone—West Hills wealthy, eastside middle-class executives, North Portland blue-collar workers and downtown street youth alike; men who sleep with men (MSM), lesbians, queer street youth, many to keep awake or to get through sex work

How's meth's taken: injected, smoked, snorted, eaten and taken up the butt; high varies for each method; snorting and injection preferred among Portland MSM meth users

How meth's procured: purchased on the street or out of dealers' houses; Portland users find it easily at parties, clubs, bathhouses and bars

How much meth costs: In Portland, 1/16 ounce, a "teener" of meth (six to eight "bumps" or hits) costs \$60 to \$100 depending on source and purity

Where meth comes from: meth labs in rural areas of Oregon, California, Southwest Washington, Mexico or the American Southwest

How meth harms: risky sexual behavior contributes to contracting HIV, syphilis and other sexually transmitted diseases; affects the health of teeth and gums, skin, lungs, liver, kidneys and gastrointestinal tracts; sleep deprivation, dehydration and malnutrition; long-term effects include the depletion of neurotransmitters, damage to nerve centers, increasing paranoia and anxiety and even psychosis

How meth kills: deeper and deeper depression sometimes results in suicide; heart attack and seizures when mixed with other drugs, especially psychiatric medications (such as Prozac, Zoloft or Paxil) or medications that affect heart rates, such as Viagra

How to beat meth: treatment and other recovery methods work; several are gay-oriented, including ASAP Treatment Services' Triangle Project, 503-224-0075; De Paul Treatment Center, 503-535-1150; Crystal Meth Anon, crystalmeth_anon@msn.com

Where to get more info on meth: www.tweaker.org—a hip, up-to-date resource for harm reduction; www.crystalneon.org—a site that offers downloadable brochures and useful, no-bullshit information



PHOTOS BY SGT. ERIC SCHOBER/PORTLAND POLICE BUREAU



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