Crystal meth: Understanding its allure

Outbreaks of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs)—particularly syphilis, drug-resistant gonorrhea and, more recently, LGV—are occurring against a background of substance use and unprotected sex with many partners among some groups of gay and bisexual men in North America and Western Europe. Exposure to these infections can help facilitate the transmission of HIV, by weakening the immune system and causing sores, ulcers and bleeding in the mouth, penis and rectum. More recently, transmission of at least one case of multi-drug-resistant HIV has been documented in this setting.

If the cycle of dysfunction and multiple infections is to be broken and lives and personal dignity restored, then researchers, policy planners and the staff of public health units and AIDS service organizations desperately need to understand the reasons why some people risk themselves, their health and the lives of their sexual partners. Only when that understanding has been reached can rational, humane and effective plans to help stem the HIV/AIDS pandemic be tested and implemented.

Although TreatmentUpdate 148 briefly reviewed the motivations and consequences of exposure to the highly addictive illicit drug crystal methamphetamine, the current issue explores these ideas in much more depth. In our first report, we highlight the many effects of crystal meth on the body and brain. This lays the foundation for our second report, where interviews with crystal meth users reveal why some people with HIV/AIDS or at high risk for HIV/AIDS perceive this drug, at least initially, to be so enticing.

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Decisions about particular medical treatments should always be made in consultation with a qualified medical practitioner knowledgeable about HIV- and hepatitis C-related illness and the treatments in question.

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