



METHAMPHETAMINE – THE CURRENT STATE OF PLAY: NEW NATIONAL RESEARCH

For immediate release

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It would be unwise to think that all methamphetamine users in Australia are the same, new research to be presented in Cairns on Sunday suggests.

Methamphetamine users use different forms of the drug, and they take it through different routes of administration. Injecting drug users are likely to be heavier users of the drug, whereas ecstasy users are less frequent users.

These findings will be presented at the National Drug Trends Conference in Cairns on Sunday, November 5 and are from the Illicit Drug Reporting System (IDRS) and the Ecstasy and Related Drug Reporting System (EDRS). The IDRS monitors the price, purity, availability and use of the four main illicit drug types – heroin, amphetamine, cocaine and cannabis. The EDRS examines ecstasy and related drug markets.

To provide timely information on emerging illicit drug trends, interviews are carried out with people who are regular drug users, and with professionals in drug-related fields. The results of these interviews are compared with trends observed in other indicators of drug use, such as drug seizures, overdoses, arrests and treatment numbers.

Associate Professor Louisa Degenhardt, from the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC) at the University of New South Wales said methamphetamine users are a diverse group.

“Recent public discussions have characterised all methamphetamine users as heavy users of the crystal form of the drug,” Dr Degenhardt said. “We need to remember that there are distinct groups of users, who use methamphetamine in different forms and with varying frequency. Some users will experience very real and significant problems related to their methamphetamine use, but it is unwise to regard this group as the majority of users.”

Key findings from the EDRS on methamphetamine use include:

- Not all ecstasy users who use methamphetamine are ‘ice’ or ‘crystal’ users
- Over half of ice users use the drug at home and not in public locations such as nightclubs and dance parties
- Even though all forms of methamphetamine were regarded as relatively easy to obtain, ecstasy users were using less than once a month
- Ecstasy remains the most favoured drug amongst this group (45% of users, compared to 6% who favoured ice)

“Ice is frequently referred to as a ‘party drug’,” said Dr Degenhardt. “This research suggests that ice is not necessarily being used in that way. It is less likely to be used in the contexts that many people associate with the party scene such as nightclubs and dance parties.”

“Recent reports have suggested that crystal methamphetamine is replacing ecstasy among ecstasy users. We have no evidence to support that assertion from this study. Very few of the ecstasy users we interviewed reported crystal as their favourite drug – ecstasy remains by far the most popular drug of choice for this group.”

“This group is at least as likely to be using less pure forms of methamphetamine (such as “speed” powder, or base methamphetamine), and on average, they are using ice less frequently than other forms of the drug.”

Key findings from the IDRS on methamphetamine use include:

- In the national sample of injecting drug users (IDU), the use of other forms of methamphetamine was just as common and just as frequent as ‘ice’ (crystal) use
- Even among this relatively heavy drug using group, crystal use was on average around 10 days out of the past 180
- The use of other less pure forms of methamphetamine was at least as frequent despite IDU reporting that crystal was just as available as the powder form

The majority of people who are experiencing significant problems with methamphetamine often have a range of alcohol and other drug problems, including heroin use.

“Many of the IDU surveyed still said that heroin was their preferred drug even though they are using it less frequently than in the past. This suggests that the increase in use of methamphetamine amongst this group has more to do with the continued lack of high quality heroin rather than their preference for methamphetamine,” said Dr Degenhardt.

However, problems aren’t only experienced by injectors. Even smokers of the drug can experience problems with methamphetamine use, including dependence and psychosis.

“Methamphetamine use remains a significant problem for some users and continues to be a major burden on the health and law enforcement sectors, particularly workers on the ‘front-line’.”

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IDRS – METHAMPHETAMINE FINDINGS

As in previous years, the 2006 IDRS distinguished between methamphetamine powder (speed), methamphetamine base and crystal methamphetamine (ice). Information is also obtained on use patterns of liquid methamphetamine (oxblood) and prescription stimulants; however as the prevalence of use remains low, price, purity and availability data are not obtained.

Table 1: Proportion of injecting drug users (IDU) who reported use of speed powder in the preceding six months, 2000-2006

	National	NSW	ACT	VIC	TAS	SA	WA	NT	QLD
2000	58	32	63	49	77	51	81	70	58
2001	62	42	63	74	45	47	87	63	80
2002	56	39	51	70	35	56	77	67	55
2003	55	31	48	70	51	53	71	60	58
2004	53	35	41	65	60	44	61	60	61
2005	60	38	59	75	76	39	61	69	65
2006	56	49	58	71	54	39	66	57	54

Source: IDRS IDU interviews

Table 2: Proportion of IDU who reported use of base methamphetamine in the preceding six months, 2001-2006*

	National	NSW	ACT	VIC	TAS	SA	WA	NT	QLD
2001	40	23	36	32	52	59	56	18	75
2002	39	23	30	20	74	65	56	21	42
2003	35	32	13	18	46	51	40	30	50
2004	38	31	25	11	72	46	45	26	60
2005	39	38	28	13	79	61	54	16	40
2006	38	43	32	15	55	52	40	26	53

Source: IDRS IDU interviews *did not ask about base in 2000

Table 3: Proportion of IDU who reported use of crystal methamphetamine in the preceding six months, 2000-2006

	National	NSW	ACT	VIC	TAS	SA	WA	NT	QLD
2000	15	14	17	9	6	11	51	6	13
2001	53	29	72	52	56	58	85	24	75
2002	35	25	34	26	20	56	74	20	39
2003	54	38	65	50	69	48	80	34	60
2004	52	45	73	41	52	48	83	32	51
2005	43	38	62	29	50	46	68	21	36
2006	57	57	88	53	56	49	76	29	55

Source: IDRS IDU interviews

Table 4: Median days of methamphetamine use in the preceding six months by those who used methamphetamine, 2006*

	National	NSW	ACT	VIC	TAS	SA	WA	NT	QLD
Speed	12	20	10	13	6	5	6	12	20.5
Base	6	5	4.5	3	12	10	5	5	13
Ice	10	12	15.5	5	9	6	20	4	6
Liquid	3	2^	10^	3^	3^	3^	2.5^	5	5
Any form**	24	26	30	16	24	12	32.5	19	28

Source: IDRS IDU interviews

* Maximum number of days, i.e. daily use = 180

^ Very small numbers reported (n<10)

** Includes speed powder, base, ice/crystal and liquid amphetamine.

Table 5: Reports of current methamphetamine availability by IDU who commented, 2006

	National n=450	NSW n=78	ACT n=59	VIC n=65	TAS n=51	SA n=23	WA n=56	NT n=53	QLD n=65
Speed									
Base	n=288	n=71	n=19	n=2	n=51	n=45	n=28	n=18	n=54
Ice	n=400	n=86	n=83	n=27	n=48	n=27	n=65	n=15	n=49
Speed (%)									
Very easy	42	45	34	59	43	65	36	17	45
Easy	43	37	56	29	49	26	45	53	42
Difficult	12	13	7	5	8	9	16	26	12
Very difficult	4	5	3	8	0	0	4	4	2
Base (%)									
Very easy	34	41	32	0	31	44	36	17	26
Easy	50	48	47	50	61	47	32	50	57
Difficult	14	9	21	50	6	4	29	33	17
Very difficult	2	3	0	0	2	4	4	0	0
Ice (%)									
Very easy	40	57	51	37	23	37	37	7	22
Easy	43	31	42	44	52	44	48	47	43
Difficult	15	8	7	19	21	15	14	33	29
Very difficult	3	4	0	0	4	4	2	13	6

Source: IDRS IDU interviews

^ Very small numbers reported (n<10)

EDRS – METHAMPHETAMINE FINDINGS

Table 6: Proportion of Regular Ecstasy Users (REU) who reported use of speed powder in the preceding six months, 2003-2006

	National	NSW	ACT	VIC	TAS	SA	WA	NT	QLD
2003	73	79	64	89	67	65	83	81	57
2004	68	81	64	92	68	62	78	72	42
2005	74	76	70	85	77	66	85	73	57
2006	64	55	66	91	62	52	65	59	58

Source: EDRS REU interviews

Table 7: Proportion of REU who reported use of base methamphetamine in the preceding six months, 2003-2006

	National	NSW	ACT	VIC	TAS	SA	WA	NT	QLD
2003	35	42	24	28	24	70	32	32	34
2004	39	39	31	34	20	72	31	45	39
2005	38	43	27	21	23	82	38	29	45
2006	34	24	34	12	40	63	32	18	38

Source: EDRS REU interviews

Table 8: Proportion of REU who reported use of crystal methamphetamine in the preceding six months, 2003-2006

	National	NSW	ACT	VIC	TAS	SA	WA	NT	QLD
2003	52	48	56	64	52	48	77	40	38
2004	45	46	39	52	16	47	80	35	42
2005	38	40	26	42	10	41	69	32	50
2006	49	56	37	49	27	61	77	26	50

Source: EDRS REU interviews

Table 9: Median days of methamphetamine use in the preceding six months by those who used methamphetamine, 2006

	National	NSW	ACT	VIC	TAS	SA	WA	NT	QLD
Speed	6	5	4	12	3	12	6	3.5	5
Base	4	3.5	4	4	4	6	5	2	3
Ice	5	6	5	5	5	4	6	2	4
Any form**	9	10	6	12	5.5	12	12	4.5	7

Source: EDRS REU interviews

* Maximum number of days, i.e. daily use = 180

^ Very small numbers reported (n<10)

** Includes speed powder, base and ice/crystal.