

## **Methamphetamine Use and Oral Health**

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Methamphetamine is an inexpensive, easy-to-make illicit drug. It is known by several street names: “meth,” “speed,” “ice,” “chalk,” “crank,” “fire,” “glass,” “crystal” and “tina.” It is made in tens of thousands of illegal laboratories across the country.

“Meth” is an addictive drug that affects the nervous system. It causes high levels of the neurotransmitters norepinephrine, dopamine and serotonin to accumulate in the brain, which stimulates brain cells and produces euphoria. Individuals may become addicted quickly and use the drug with increasing frequency and in ever-larger doses.

The use of this drug is on the rise in the United States, even though it produces devastating effects on users’ health and well-being. It can cause shortness of breath, increased respiration, hyperthermia, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and irregular heartbeat, high blood pressure and permanent brain damage. Other effects include irritability, insomnia, confusion, hallucinations, tremors, convulsions, anxiety, paranoia and aggressiveness.

### **“Meth Mouth”**

Rampant tooth decay is a very common side effect. Some users describe their teeth as “blackened, stained, rotting, crumbling or falling apart.” This condition often is called “meth mouth.” Often, there is no hope of treating the methamphetamine-damaged teeth, and they are extracted.

The causes of methamphetamine-related tooth decay include the following:

- The drug’s acidic nature;
- Its ability to dry the mouth, reducing the amount of protective saliva around the teeth;
- A drug-induced craving for high-calorie carbonated beverages;
- The tendency of users to grind and clench their teeth;
- The duration of the drug’s effects (12 hours versus one hour for cocaine),

which leads to long periods when users are not likely to clean their teeth.

Based on the 2003 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 12.3 million Americans aged 12 years and older had tried methamphetamine at least once in their lifetimes, with the majority of past-year users between 18 and 34 years of age. Rural areas are targeted by drug traffickers in an effort to escape law enforcement, and most use is found in the western, southwestern and midwestern United States.

Dentists, parents and others should be concerned if they notice patients, family members or friends – especially teenagers and young adults – who have unaccounted-for and accelerated tooth decay. Heavy users may appear malnourished because methamphetamine acts as an appetite suppressant.

### **Additional Information**

For more information, the American Dental Association recommends contacting The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration’s Web site ([www.samhsa.gov](http://www.samhsa.gov)) This site includes a substance-abuse treatment facility locator, a physician locator, a calculator to figure out how much it costs to support a drug habit, a guide for parents and a toll-free help line for local treatment centers (1-800-662-HELP).

For additional information you can also visit the National Institute for Drug Abuse Web site at “[222.nida.nih.gov/Infofacts/methamphetamine.html](http://222.nida.nih.gov/Infofacts/methamphetamine.html).”

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