

# METHAMPHETAMINE USE AND HIV RISK AMONG LATINO GAY MEN



## CRYSTAL METH USE IN THE GAY COMMUNITY

In recent years, research has shown a dramatic and troubling increase in the use of methamphetamine (**crystal meth**) within the gay community. This is a toxic and highly addictive stimulant that inhibits the uptake of dopamine in the brain and produces feelings of **increased energy, euphoria, and prolonged sexual arousal**. Crystal meth users report “fabulous” feelings of personal power and well-being when under the influence. Users describe having the ability to have sex with multiple partners – sex that lasts longer, extends over long periods of time, and is perceived as more daring and intense.

However, such “fabulous” effects are often accompanied by “**disastrous**” consequences. Frequent use (more than once a month) of crystal meth is associated with serious negative consequences for physical and mental health including neurological damage and psychiatric dysfunction, as well as a higher risk for HIV transmission. The increased use of crystal meth among gay men has resulted in a higher number of drug-related emergency room admissions and a greater number of gay men seeking psychological and medical help for drug-related problems. Recent waves of new HIV and syphilis infections among gay men are closely connected to their crystal meth use. A review of research published in 2001 cites 21 studies of men who have sex with men (MSM) that show significant relationships between drug use and sexual risk behavior. Eleven of those studies report more specifically a significant relation between crystal meth use and both sexual risk behavior and/or HIV sero-conversion.

*“I feel like invincible, you have so much energy, you can do anything...you can have a hard-on that goes for six hours, you know what I mean?”*

*“Sex is better, much better... I go for like nine hours. It’s more passionate”*

## HOW MANY LATINO GAY MEN USE CRYSTAL METH?

Until very recently crystal meth was perceived mostly as a problem of the white gay community and not for Latino gay men. However, recent studies have shown that the proportion of Latino gay men who use crystal meth is very similar to rates found in the white gay community. A recent study involving a large random sample of more than 2,000 Latino gay men in San Francisco showed that 45% used some type of recreational drug in the six months prior to the study and 15% used crystal meth. Men in the study were recruited from different types of social or sexual venues, including Latino identified gay bars, mainstream (mostly white) gay bars, sex clubs, internet chat rooms and sex phone lines. Rates of crystal meth use was slightly lower in Latino-identified venues (11%) than in mainstream venues (14%), suggesting that more acculturated Latino men are more likely to use. However, the difference observed between those recruited in Latino and mainstream venues was much smaller than expected by those who believe that crystal meth is a problem exclusively of the white gay community. **The highest rate of drug use, and in particular crystal meth use, was found among men who were recruited from the internet chat rooms and phone lines**, with two-thirds reporting crystal meth use in the last six months.

# REASONS FOR METH USE AMONG LATINO GAY MEN

A survey of 300 Latino gay men who use stimulants (crystal meth, cocaine, and crack) included 153 men who reported crystal meth as their most-frequently used stimulant. Prior to the survey, 70 in-depth interviews (50 of them with current crystal meth users) provided a close examination of their personal experiences. Reasons for crystal meth were categorized under the following five effects, in order of reported frequency.

When stating their reasons for why they use a given stimulant, crystal meth users are similar to cocaine users with the following exceptions.

## INCREASED ENERGY

*“It gives me the energy, it gives me the stamina to finish all these projects, it also gives me a feeling of being able to stay up with my friends and partying.”*

## COPING WITH STRESSORS

*“[Speed], like, makes me worry less about things. I stop thinking about my family, about my debts in Mexico, about the 15 of us who live together, about work, about the pressure...”*

*“I started recreational use [crystal] at that point, 21, 22. I did that for a while and used it then for similar reasons, escaping the realities of graduating college and can't find a job kind of a thing.”*

*“There's no loneliness. There's no other worries. There's just that focusing in that particular moment”*

## SEXUAL ENHANCEMENT

*“I felt like it rushed to my brain, I felt my skin get hot and I felt the desire to have sex with whoever was around...”*

*“I become even more hardcore. Sexual risks and inhibitions are totally gone”*

## SOCIABILITY AND SOCIAL CONNECTION

*“I guess I'm shy, so I use drugs to kind of remove that, so I can meet people...”*

*“It brings in companionship - with crystal I'm able to get, you know, I fit into this circle of gay men”*

## FOCUSED PRODUCTIVITY

*“When I did do speed by myself in small amounts was back when I was in college, and that's because I was pushing 3- or 4-day deadlines. And that was why, you know, on day 3, day 4, a little line is a little better than a cup of espresso. But I did get that degree...”*

*“Your mind is quick. You think of things quickly and process them...I feel focused, I feel clear, and I see a path of action that I just need to take. And not to worry about you know, stalling or freezing up, just being able to cope...”*

**COCAINE USERS  
MORE FREQUENTLY INDICATE:**

**not to feel left out  
to feel more socially connected  
to be more sociable**

**CRYSTAL METH USERS  
MORE FREQUENTLY INDICATE:**

**to have better sex  
to have more sex  
to have more anal sex**

**As one study  
participant stated:**

*“Cocaine is more for relaxing, for party, dancing. But crystal is for sex. To get nasty for hours and hours and hours...”*

## POSITIVE SEXUAL EFFECTS

In studies of mostly white gay and bisexual men, crystal meth is reported as the first drug of choice for sex, with heightened and prolonged sexual activity as a major rationale. Many state that crystal meth increases their desire for anal sex and potentially high-risk sexual practices. **Crystal meth has been described as the “quintessential gay drug”** because for many it allows them to meet sexual expectations of the gay culture such as multiple encounters with multiple partners in a relatively short period of time. Latino gay men report very similar sexual experiences.

In the study of Latino stimulant-using gay men in San Francisco, crystal meth users reported multiple sexual effects under the influence. More than two-thirds of the sample said that they **“felt horny for a long period of time,” “sex felt better,”** and **“sex lasted a long time.”**

Almost the same proportion of respondents reported that under the influence of crystal meth they had sex “without guilt or shame” and focused on sex “without mental distractions.”

*“The intensity, it makes me feel incredibly well. Yes, the focusing on the sex, the focusing means unity in all that time when you are having sex... when I’m having sex under those circumstances there’s nothing else to think about...”*

About one-fourth of the men reported that crystal meth had a powerful **“sexual disinhibition”** effect, allowing them to have **“raunchy or kinky”** sex and receptive anal sex “with little or no pain.” Most men emphasized being able to engage in sexual acts they desired but were not able to for one reason or another without using the drug. **With crystal meth, they found a new sense of courage and safety that allowed them to do as they wanted.**

*“Speed will take you there when you want to go there, you are like, like it gives you an excuse to like be freer with yourself which is a good thing.”*

## NEGATIVE SEXUAL EFFECTS

Similar to studies of white gay men, not all sexual effects reported by Latino gay men are experienced as positive or pleasant. While more than half said that their erections lasted a long time, some reported sexual dysfunction, such as losing erections (**crystal dick**) (17%) and having **difficulty achieving orgasm** (20%) under the influence of crystal meth. While men truly enjoyed the pleasures of strong sexual arousal, the fact that the arousal was unusually prolonged, and not diminished after orgasm, often resulted in some degree of tension and discomfort. For example, men reported still wanting to have sex even after a night filled with sexual activity. Many men spoke of being so sexually hungry that they had to masturbate several times in an attempt to find sexual satisfaction.

It is no surprise that for many, such prolonged states of arousal were often experienced as tension and dissatisfaction:

Latino gay men who use crystal meth also spoke about the increased tendency to sexually objectify other men when under the influence, and how such focus on their own sexual satisfaction at times interfered with the possibility of warmer and more nurturing interactions with sexual partners:

For some, the experience of strong and prolonged sexual arousal, coupled with sexual disinhibition, turned into a loss of control.

*“I got up and ate something. I went back to sleep, I felt bad. I had a horrible hangover, but I still was aroused... I was tired but aroused at the same time, I mean, every thought seemed to turn into wanting to have sex.”*

*“Sexually, physically, I mean extremely euphoric: I want to keep having sex, I want to do this, I want to do that, I’m telling you I was extremely sexually aroused. I masturbated three times that day.”*

*“I am running around looking for ass, or I’m not running around, just looking at ass. And I start like getting all like built up like you know, sexual energy, but not really like sexual, like tension...”*

*“On crystal meth you don’t satisfy, you know, it’s just like that need, you know, that urge for sex that you never satisfy.”*

*“I have a lot of sexual energy and I’m just, I’m just looking at men like they are pieces of meat...”*

*“It’s funny because I probably have a better time, chance, if I really like someone, being nice to them and talking them into like going out to dinner or whatever. Under the influence of drugs I don’t know what to say, I stumble, I’m nervous, and all I think about is sexual gratification and wanting this person, wanting to use this person for sexual gratification.”*

*“It can really make you do things that I wouldn’t, I can lose a little self-control, in what I do and how far I go...”*

*“I got real high and I got really horny, so horny that it was out of control. It was very out of control. It’s like I could have fucked forever...”*

## LIFE IMPACT

Latino gay men have also reported a wide range of negative consequences of crystal meth use in their lives, including mental confusion and paranoia, social isolation, and physical depletion, among others. The following quotes are a reflection of the “costs” that study participants associated with their drug use.

### PARANOIA

*“That also makes me want to stop because I have been feeling this horror of someone who is following me, uh... who wants to kill me or that is hiding but is following me.”*

### SOCIAL ISOLATION

*“I enjoyed doing them but at same time I was in another world... living in a world where at times you lose all shame, you lose friends, family, you lose... everything. Sometimes I wouldn’t even make a phone call, all I cared about was getting high and that was it.”*

### PHYSICAL DEPLETION

*“I feel so gross that I can’t wash it off anymore. It’s like you feel like this inside dirty, like because there’s no food in your stomach for the past days, you’ve been just like running on empty and like you’re really gaunt now because you’ve been in a constant workout.”*

In the San Francisco survey of stimulant using Latino gay men, crystal meth users reported significantly more negative life impact from their drug use in comparison to cocaine users. This was true for different aspects of their life such as physical and mental health, work and finances, family and lover relationships, friendships, and others. Paradoxically, crystal meth users who elsewhere reported sexual enhancement benefits, more often reported negative consequences in their sex lives compared to cocaine users.

## Relation to HIV Risk

A large proportion (72%) of Latino gay men who use crystal meth report at least one instance of unprotected anal intercourse (UAI) within a period of 6 months. This is the highest HIV risk rate ever reported for any Latino MSM subgroup studied to date. Gay Latino crystal meth users report higher rates of risk behavior than their cocaine using peers. They also are more likely to perceive themselves to have been at risk than cocaine users, showing their awareness.

On the other hand, research also suggests that many Latino gay men use condoms, at least some of the time, even when they are under the influence of crystal meth. For example, data on men who engage in sex both under the influence of crystal meth and when sober indicate higher rates of unprotected intercourse when under the influence (64% vs. 55%). However, this difference is not statistically significant and smaller than typically assumed. Rates of condom use under the influence are also unexpectedly high for this group of men, with more than 80% of the men reporting that they use protection at least “some of the time.” This is true both when under the influence of crystal meth and when sober.

## ASPECTS OF LIFE NEGATIVELY IMPACTED

ABILITY TO THINK CLEARLY

FINANCES

MENTAL HEALTH

MOTIVATION TO IMPROVE YOUR LIFE

PHYSICAL HEALTH

RELATIONSHIPS WITH FAMILY

RELATIONSHIPS WITH FRIENDS

RELATIONSHIPS WITH LOVERS OR PRIMARY PARTNERS

SELF-ESTEEM

SENSE OF SOCIAL CONNECTION

SEX LIFE

SPIRITUAL OR RELIGIOUS LIFE

STRESS LEVEL

WORK LIFE

The available data suggest that the presence of crystal meth during a sexual encounter is not a sufficient condition to explain the increased risk for HIV risk transmission during that encounter. **The personal, interpersonal, and situational factors that interact with crystal meth use to produce the increased HIV risk are currently poorly understood.** Further research and contributions by community health practitioners is needed. Current research efforts with Latino gay men suggest that the **increased frequency of use (from monthly, to weekly, to daily) coupled with the increased social isolation, contribute to increased HIV risk.** These factors are related to the “spiraling down” towards addictive patterns of use and negative life consequences.

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## THE STATE OF INTERVENTION APPROACHES

Prevention interventions with crystal meth users and their drug-related problems have been limited to two distinct approaches and directed at two different extremes of the population of gay men:

- ➔ **Substance abuse treatment for men who are drug-dependent**
- ➔ **Social marketing campaigns directed at the larger gay community that warn about the negative effects and consequences of crystal meth use**

Substance abuse treatment approaches typically demand and reward total abstinence from the drug. These are designed mostly for men who have “hit rock-bottom” and seek treatment on their own or are forced into treatment by legal authorities. Research has shown that substance abuse treatments that use contingency management (typically incentives for drug abstinence) can be effective in reducing both crystal meth use and increasing condom use, particularly when those treatments are tailored to gay populations. While only a handful of “harm reduction” programs are available to crystal meth users, and no systematic research has been done to test how well they work, there is anecdotal evidence that they can be effective in helping men who seek help for their crystal meth related problems.

On the other hand, the success of media campaigns, particularly those campaigns that “demonize” crystal meth, has been questioned by many in the community. **The concern is that some of these campaigns may result in shaming users into silence and increasing their isolation.** However, there is no research evidence to show whether these campaigns improve or worsen the situation.

Sorely lacking are interventions to prevent the “spiraling down” or to reduce the negative consequences of crystal meth use, particularly for Latino gay men as they struggle to regulate their drug use. **We believe that interventions aimed at reducing the stigmatization of crystal meth users, that reduce the social isolation of the user, and that promote self-generated harm reduction strategies might be effective in reducing the negative impact of crystal meth use, and its related HIV risks.** However, at the present time such interventions are only being developed and piloted. It is too early to determine their success at achieving their stated aims.

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