

Culture of meth

'Poor man's cocaine' often creeps up on those who use it

By [Samantha Johnston](#)

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Methamphetamine is like Star-bucks coffee for the working class, said a doctor who has studied the drug.

A lot of the initial use of methamphetamine is functional, but the powerful addictive properties of methamphetamine make it a silent cancer.

"If you think about it in rural areas, many people are being asked to work long hours and double shifts and people may start using it for energy and increased productivity," said Susan Dreisbach, doctor of health and behavior and assistant research professor at the University of Colorado at Denver. "Women try it for weight loss. Men use it because it can mean sexual endurance and still others use it because it produces a euphoria."

In response to the rising rate of methamphetamine use in rural Colorado, three University of Colorado at Denver researchers gathered data from systematic interviews of methamphetamine users in rural areas of the state. The researchers wanted to gain an understanding of who is using methamphetamine, what social and cultural factors might be contributing to increased meth use, what health risks meth users face and what services are available and/or needed in rural Colorado communities.

"Sadly, people find out that meth is fun to party with," said Dreisbach. "But there are two sides -- recreational and functional -- and the reality is that the addiction is so powerful. For the majority of people, meth creeps up on them and becomes a normal daily need."

Poor man's cocaine

Researchers who participated in the study found that methamphetamines are not exclusive to any socioeconomic, age, ethnic or occupational group. In rural Colorado, the drug predominantly is used by white, working-class men and women between the ages of 20 and 45, according to the Alcohol and Drug Abuse Division (ADAD) of the Colorado Department of Public Health and Environment.

The majority of users interviewed said that initial use was sporadic and in low dosages for minor household or work demands, losing weight, weekend partying and sexual recreating, but that a rapid, uncontrolled escalation of use followed.

According to information gleaned from the ADAD study, meth has gained the reputation of a "poor man's cocaine" in rural areas. Although the cost per gram is similar to cocaine, the longer-lasting effects of meth give it the reputation as a less expensive high.

The ADAD study findings strongly suggest that men and women alike were attracted to the income that could be associated with working long hours, working more than one job or by selling the drug itself.

Unfortunately, weight loss is often a primary motivation for initiating methamphetamine use, especially among women.

"In addition, many women described the rapid weight gain associated with quitting and treatment as a major reason for relapse," the study's executive summary said.

The study also suggests that the abundance of remote areas in rural communities makes detection of meth manufacturing and sales more difficult.

"Unfortunately, meth users are most likely to be discovered when they cannot meet employer expectations, when they neglect their children or when they commit crimes that are out of character," Dreisbach said.

Looming crisis

As of 2001, the Office of National Drug Control Policy reported that nearly 10.9 percent of teens in Colorado reported using methamphetamine during their lifetime. Perhaps more troubling is that preliminary ADAD research shows that teens may not see smoking methamphetamine as any more harmful than smoking marijuana.

Turning a blind eye to the increasing teenage user population could have devastating public health effects, Dreisbach said.

"One of the really concerning things is that some teenage girls are trading sex for drugs because they don't have other resources. One of the things that meth does is that it peaks sexual arousal and allows a lot of men to maintain an erection for hours," Dreisbach said.

"So you can imagine if you are already spun out, you're probably not thinking about condoms, and the reality of this is that many of these men have spent a significant amount of time in prison and could have an undetected disease that could be passed on through sex."

Dangerous implications

The implications of unprotected and frequent sex among meth users could be of epidemic proportions, Dreisbach said.

"I am very concerned that this population (meth users) is a huge drain on community resources, and is a prime group to potentially pull HIV and hepatitis into the drug community and very possibly into the non-drug using population," Dreisbach said.

Sharing syringes and other associated supplies such as rinse water has become a larger problem with the increased popularity of injecting methamphetamine because of a myth surrounding purity of the product.

"Because the feds have cut down on the precursor drugs, people are getting more and more creative about what ingredients they can use," Dreisbach said. "So, the new myth is that injecting may give you the fewest contaminants."

Rural challenges

According to the study, the challenges that face rural communities are social structures that make staying sober difficult for meth users.

Users and community members interviewed for the study felt that smaller communities tend to be socially stratified, providing few opportunities for upward mobility for those from lower socioeconomic classes.

A lack of social opportunities made "sober" fun less attractive. Youth who were interviewed about methamphetamine use in Craig also indicated that teen meth use is often a function of "nothing else to do."

Because meth users tend to keep company with other meth users, staying sober is more difficult because everyone around the drug user is encouraging the user to resume his or her habit.

And, like former meth user and Craig resident Malea Gowins said, moving to another community to get a fresh start often means meeting new networks of meth users, creating an inability to escape the temptations of the drug.

Traditionally, urban areas have received the bulk of grants and funding for prevention and treatment, according to the ADAD study. But the need for resources in rural communities is great, said Mason Siedshclaw, a 14th Judicial District probation officer. In Moffat County, there are no treatment facilities. Users who need treatment must travel to Glenwood Springs, Grand Junction or Denver and often waiting lists are so long that users who need rehabilitation can't be placed quickly enough to curb their addiction.

"Most everybody would agree that meth is possibly the hardest drug to recover from," Dreisbach said. "Certainly one of the hardest if not the hardest."

To reach Samantha Johnston, call 824-2031 or send an e-mail to

sjohnston@craigdailypress.com

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