

METHAMPHETAMINE: RELATION TO SEXUAL RISK BEHAVIORS OF YOUNG GAY MEN AND INADVERTENT CONSUMPTION IN TABLETS SOLD AS ECSTASY

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Objective: Recent studies inconsistently link ‘club’ drug use among gay men and sexual risk behaviours. In this qualitative study, we compare and contrast two ‘club’ drugs: methamphetamine (crystal) and ecstasy (MDMA). We also report complementary results of laboratory analyses of tablets sold locally as ecstasy.

Methods: Life history interviews were conducted with 12 HIV-seroconverters and 12 age-matched controls recruited from a prospective cohort study of young gay men in Vancouver, British Columbia. Textual data concerning illicit substance use and unsafe sex were analyzed using NUDIST software. Tablets seized by federal law enforcement officers at raves and clubs Oct 2002 – Aug 2003 were subjected to qualitative laboratory analysis.

Results: Most men interviewed related a substantial knowledge of and experience with crystal and ecstasy. Both drugs had attributes that enhanced gay socialization and were used in the same venues. Crystal was used to remain awake and increase energy. Ecstasy was used to induce euphoria and group connectedness. However, unlike ecstasy, crystal was associated with a distinct pattern of sexual arousal that frequently included unprotected (sometimes group) sex, was more likely to be used regularly by HIV-positive men, was considered highly addictive and problematic, and was frequently associated with erectile dysfunction. Mention of erectile dysfunction was uncommon in users of ecstasy and suggested the adulteration of tablets. Laboratory analysis indicated the presence of methamphetamine in 44 (47%) of 94 tablet samples, including 28 (47%) of the 60 tablets that contained detectable levels of MDMA.

Conclusion: Crystal and ecstasy are used in the same social venues but differ markedly in their respective relation to sexual risk behaviours. The potential for widespread inadvertent consumption of methamphetamine in tablets sold as ecstasy warrants a harm reduction strategy, including surveillance and chemical analysis of samples.