

# Qualitative Comparison of Crystal Methamphetamine and Ecstasy Use among Young Gay Men in Vancouver, Canada

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# Background

- Increasing use of ecstasy and crystal (methamphetamine)
- Increasing unprotected anal intercourse and sexually transmitted infections

# Objectives

- Compare and contrast two 'club' drugs: crystal (methamphetamine) & ecstasy (MDMA)
- Describe the extent to which tablets sold as ecstasy contain methamphetamine.

# Methods

- 12 HIV-1 *seroconverters*, 12 HIV-negative age-matched *controls*
- Recruitment from within prospective cohort study of young *gay-identified* men
- Face-to-face *life history interviews*, 4 sessions with each participant, 2001-2002
- Textual data transcribed, analyzed with NUDIST® software
- *Laboratory analysis of tablets* seized at raves and clubs, Oct 2002 – Aug 2003

# Study Population

- Average 25 years (range 19 to 30)
- 23 are Caucasian
- 2/3 had an annual income < \$10,000
- Median time from first HIV-positive test to interview was 24 months.
- HIV-seroconverters were more likely to report:
  - physical or sexual abuse in childhood
  - less post-secondary education
  - less full-time employment
- Self reports of lifetime illicit substance use were common

# Poly-substance use was common

*“I did everything: crystal, ecstasy, ketamine, poppers, GHB, cocaine, and marijuana. I never did heroin. My use started at age 22 and now it has cut down.”*

(HIV+ participant)

**Crystal and Ecstasy were used  
in the same social venues**

## Crystal and Ecstasy were used in the same social venues

*“It was Pride where it was all about being with my friends. On Friday we went to the circuit parties, nightclubs and after-hours. There were plenty of people to flirt with, but I was having more fun talking to everyone. I eventually left Sunday night from the after-hours to meet my friend at another club. I slept two hours that weekend. I used crystal and ecstasy to keep going.”* (HIV+ participant)

**Ecstasy: the social (“hug”) drug**

# Ecstasy: the social (“hug”) drug

*“I only do [ecstasy] if I am with friends, when we are together.”*  
(HIV+ participant)

*“You feel totally uninhibited, but not always in a sexual way, more in an emotional way.... Ecstasy does not make me horny. I am happy to hug someone, go to sleep or listen to music.”* (HIV- participant)

# Crystal methamphetamine: used to energize, stay awake

*“On Friday we went to the circuit parties, nightclubs and after-hours. I eventually left Sunday night from the after-hours to meet my friend at another club. I slept two hours that weekend. I used crystal ... to keep going.”*

(HIV+ participant)

**Unlike ecstasy, crystal was  
associated with high risk intercourse**

## Unlike ecstasy, crystal was associated with high risk intercourse

*“I came down with seroconversion illness after a trip to San Francisco. I had sex with about eight men in three days. Crystal-fueled marathon sessions. Completely unprotected and not even thinking about it.”*

(HIV+ participant)

*“I used to party with a bunch of guys and have sex for eight or nine hours. There would be people coming and going. Most of the guys were doing tons of crystal. They would have the stamina to fuck for hours.”* (HIV- participant)

# Crystal was frequently associated with erectile dysfunction

“If you do too much crystal, you cannot  
get an erection.” (HIV- participant)

“...they could not get it up. They were  
doing crystal, so they would take Viagra.”  
(HIV- participant)

# Erectile dysfunction was rarely mentioned by users of ecstasy

*“I get erection problems with ecstasy, and I get it with coke if the coke is cut with, I don’t know what it would be.”*

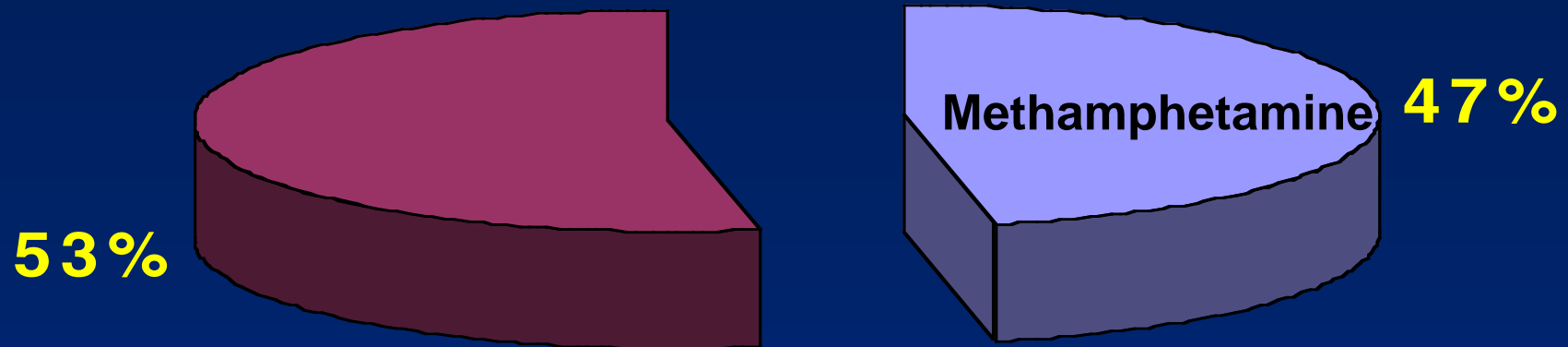
(HIV- participant)

*“There are some types of ecstasy where you cannot get an erection either.”*

(HIV- participant)

# Laboratory analysis of tablets sold as “ecstasy”

- 44 (47%) of 94 seized tablets contained *methamphetamine* (2002-2003)



# Conclusions

- Poly drug use was normative among the men interviewed
- Crystal and ecstasy are used in the same places
- These drugs differ markedly in relation to sexual risk behaviour
- 'Ecstasy' cut with methamphetamine is common
- **WARNING:** Inadvertent consumption of methamphetamine by young gay men may be widespread

# IMPLICATIONS

- Education concerning potential impurities in ecstasy and the link between crystal and unsafe sex should be a high priority
- Ongoing surveillance and chemical analysis of ecstasy samples appears to be warranted

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