

Crystal meth – what’s Manitoba doing?

By AMM Staff

Crystal methamphetamine comes from a group of methamphetamines that can be inhaled, injected and snorted and are also known as ice, crystal, crank, tweek and fire. Crystal methamphetamine is highly addictive and can cause violent and aggressive behaviour, panic attacks, brain damage and even death. Crystal methamphetamine users may go on binges – during which time they do not eat or sleep but continue taking the drug. Crystal methamphetamine is usually not used in isolation and many users also turn to alcohol and other drugs.

Source: Province of Manitoba

What is ephedra?

It is a natural stimulant found in the shrub-like plant ma huang, which grows naturally in India and China. The dried plant has been used medicinally for centuries. The active ingredient (one per cent) is ephedrine.

What is ephedrine?

Ephedrine is an alkaloid from the leaves of the ma huang plant. Most common product is ephedrine hydrochloride (salt). Used as bronchial decongestant and stimulant. Also found in many weight-loss products. Mimics epinephrine, a hormone in the brain stem that is released in response to threatening or exciting conditions.

What is pseudoephedrine?

This is a synthetic variant of ephedrine, but less potent. Used in many over-the-counter cold medications, such as nasal decongestants Sudafed, Actifed and Contact. Also acts as a central nervous system stimulant. Sometimes abused by athletes before competition to stimulate heart rate and brain activity.

Source: Winnipeg Free Press



Ice Methamphetamine Crystal
Courtesy of US Drug Enforcement Administration

Canada’s battle against crystal methamphetamine is just beginning, but the devastation caused by this highly addictive and potentially lethal drug is widespread across the Prairie Provinces. Most provinces are trying to tackle the problem by restricting the supply of crystal meth’s key ingredient – pseudoephedrine. Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Alberta have all decided to restrict the sale of cold remedies and other drugs that contain pseudoephedrine. Pharmacies across the Prairies must now sell these drugs from behind the counter (in Manitoba, the restriction of 17 single-source pseudoephedrine products came into effect on January 15, 2006).

Ontario and BC are both considering retail restrictions, while Yukon pharmacies are voluntarily moving them behind the counter. The tactic has been successful in curbing the crystal meth supply in the northern US.

Impact on community safety

While meth use affects many areas of community life, a primary concern for municipalities is the impact on community safety. In 2004, the City of Edmonton produced *A Community Stakeholder View of Crystal Meth in Edmonton - Trends, Strategies, Challenges and Needs*. It said:

"The violent, criminal acts associated with crystal meth are expressions of aggression and a means of getting money to buy the drug. They have a negative impact on community safety.

An additional safety concern is the meth labs themselves. Making meth produces odourless toxic fumes which can explode, posing a danger to those who are living in or visiting that abode (socially or professionally), and those within close proximity. Many of the chemicals are flammable and highly reactive. Spending time in an environment where there has been phosphene gas, a byproduct of meth production and a poison gas used as a nerve agent in the First World War, can make people ill."

In addition, the toxic waste produced by the labs winds up in ditches, sewers and dumpsters, posing not only another public safety issue, but an environmental and financial issue as well. Cleaning up meth labs requires a heavy investment of resources. The Partnership for a Drug-Free America’s online article, ‘How Meth Affects Your Community,’ notes the environmental harm of meth labs. It states: “For each pound of meth produced, five to six pounds of hazardous waste are generated, posing immediate and long-term environmental health risks. The chemicals used to make meth are toxic, and the lab operators routinely dump waste into streams, rivers, fields, backyards and sewage systems, which can in turn contaminate water resources for humans and animals. Also, the poisonous vapors produced during cooking permeate the halls and carpets of houses and buildings, often making them uninhabitable.

“Cleaning up these sites requires specialized training and costs an average of \$2,000-\$4,000 per site in funds that come out of the already-strained budgets of state and local police. In addition, property owners are often held liable for the cost of the cleanup, so if a rental landlord finds that his tenant has been operating a meth lab on or in his property, or if a landowner finds that a clandestine lab has property, he could face devastating financial issues.”

Manitoba strategies

Manitoba is investing more than \$6 million over the next three years in new mental health and addictions services providing additional capacity and front-line supports to help deal with mental health and addictions in Manitoba, including the use of meth.

The Manitoba Meth Strategy is a collaborative, two-pronged approach involving provincial, national and international partners to restrict the supply and reduce the demand for crystal meth. The Manitoba Meth Strategy includes:

- Joining with Saskatchewan in restricting the sale of 17 single-source pseudoephedrine products, the preferred ingredient in making meth, so they are only available for sale behind the counter in pharmacies in limited quantities;
- Requiring theft of anhydrous ammonia to be reported;
- Increasing investments in mental-health and addictions programs and providing enhanced training to front-line workers to deal with crystal meth, other addictions and mental-health issues;
- Establishing the Manitoba Meth Task Force comprising government, law enforcement and addictions agencies;
- Developing a public education campaign to increase awareness of the dangers of meth use;
- Providing first-responder training about crystal meth and meth labs;
- Providing and developing prevention and education programs provided by the Addictions Foundation of Manitoba at 60 high schools;
- Formalizing and enhancing a unified takedown protocol for meth labs; and
- Continuing partnerships across the West to develop a phased-in approach restricting the sale of pseudoephedrine products.

Key ingredients: restricting the supply

Despite federal rules restricting its sale, the prime ingredient used to make crystal methamphetamine may still be easily available in Manitoba. On December 11, the *Winnipeg Free Press* reported that black market ephedrine hydrochloride, a stimulant marketed as a nasal decongestant, can be purchased with cash under the counter at health supplement stores or through the Internet.

This came as no surprise to **Cpl. Marc Samson**, RCMP Synthetic Drugs Operations Coordinator. “Everything you need to make meth is available,” said Samson, who recently presented ‘Methamphetamine Awareness and Production Methods’ to delegates at the AMM’s Annual Convention. “There’s no doubt there are operational labs out there. People are producing it for their own consumption and for resale.” (*To read an overview of Cpl. Samson’s presentation, see our Convention Recap on page 61.*)

On its own, ephedrine is more commonly known as a weight loss aid. Combined with common chemicals, however, illegal drug makers can turn ephedrine into one of the most addictive street drugs in North America. One of those common chemicals

is the agricultural fertilizer anhydrous ammonia.

The Province is drafting a regulatory amendment to require theft of anhydrous ammonia to be reported. “This regulation is being amended to strongly encourage cooperation between farmers, agri-retailers, law enforcement officials and other members of the public to protect the well-being of all Manitobans and stop this chemical from being used to produce a highly addictive, dangerous drug,” says Manitoba Agriculture, Food and Rural Initiatives Minister **Rosann Wowchuk**. “Restricting the supply of key ingredients to inhibit the production of crystal meth is just one step we can all take to reduce its availability.”

In conjunction with the amendment, the province has prepared a brochure titled *Safeguard Your Supply of Anhydrous Ammonia* that describes how to keep supplies of anhydrous ammonia safe, how to recognize theft and how to report any theft. It also points out the dangers of crystal meth. The brochure is being circulated throughout rural communities and is available at all GO Centres and GO Offices in Manitoba.

What can municipalities do?

As elected officials, it is imperative that you know what is happening in your community and the best way to do that is to be proactive. The RCMP have suggested the following actions for municipal officials:

1. **Work with your local police** – Keep the lines of communication open and take the time to discuss this issue with local police. They are your best resource on

the issue. Determine whether this is a priority in your community and let them know you want to work together.

2. **Educate your first responders** – These people are your eyes and ears. They are the ones responding to calls and making sure they know what to look for will increase your chances of finding clandestine labs and other illegal activities.
3. **Educate yourself** – Make sure you know what is happening in your community and make sure you know the signs to look out for. Visit the links below to learn more about crystal meth and how it can affect your community. ☞

Resources:

Manitoba Meth Strategy: <http://www.gov.mb.ca/healthyliving/meth>

RCMP website: http://www.rcmp.ca/drugenf/drugs_e.htm

The City of Winnipeg has a web page describing how to recognize clandestine drug labs at http://www.winnipeg.ca/police/drug_awareness/clangestinedruglabs.stm

Health Canada has an informative fact sheet on methamphetamine at: http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/ahc-asc/media/nr-cp/2005/2005_58bk_e.html

A Community Stakeholder View of Crystal Meth in Edmonton: <http://www.edmonton.ca/CityGov/CommServices/SaferCitiesReportOnCrystalMethFebruary04.pdf>

Partnership for a Drug-Free America – How Meth Affects Your Community: http://www.drugfree.org/Portal/DrugIssue/MethResources/meth_affects_community.html

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