

Methamphetamine “Meth” Mouth

“Meth Mouth” is a term used to describe the mouth of a methamphetamine user because of the serious damage this drug can cause to the mouth, teeth and general health. Also referred to as “ice,” “meth,” “speed,” “crank,” “quartz” and “crystal,” this illegal and highly addictive drug can be swallowed, injected, snorted or smoked. In less than a year, meth users can go from having a healthy mouth to rampant decay and tooth loss. A recent Statistics Canada survey showed 3.3 per cent of Ontario students reported using meth in the past year. Worldwide, the World Health Organization estimates over 34,000,000 use crystal meth daily, more than crack cocaine and heroin combined.

The Ontario Dental Hygienists’ Association does not condone the illicit use of methamphetamines.

SYMPTOMS EXPERIENCED BY METH USERS

- Serious tooth pain from abscesses and acute nerve pain due to decay
- Pain in the gums when eating
- Fever, malaise, nausea, usually due to tooth abscesses and gum disease
- Headaches, neck aches and jaw aches, which relate to severe grinding and clenching of the teeth

IMPACT ON ORAL HEALTH

Methamphetamine use damages oral health in several ways:

- **Dry mouth (or xerostomia)** – Dry mouth has serious consequences for the addict. Meth has a tendency to reduce saliva production. A dry mouth increases cravings for sugary carbonated beverages and food, which can damage teeth and gums. Saliva helps to rinse away food debris and decay-causing acids. A “high” from the drug lasts for several hours, during which time meth users will probably not brush or floss to remove bacterial plaque (soft, white sticky substance) and sugary materials.
- **Tooth decay** – The very high sugar content in the diets of meth users, along with ineffective oral hygiene, allows the bacteria in the plaque to create



acids that dissolve their teeth, especially around the gum line where the concentration of plaque is the highest. This is what causes rampant tooth decay. It starts with severe sensitivity and can lead to pain and tooth loss. Left untreated, teeth can become blackened and rotten, possibly requiring full-mouth extraction.

- **Gum (or periodontal) disease** – Meth causes the vessels in the oral cavity to shrink, which reduces the blood supply to the gums and can seriously damage or kill the tissues. In addition, meth users are susceptible to infection and gum disease, since their immune system is not able to fight off the germs that live in the mouth.
- **Broken or cracked teeth** – Meth users tend to clench and/or grind their teeth due to nervousness or stress from drug reaction. This can cause jaws to ache and already weakened teeth to crack and break.

In addition to the physical effects of meth on the mouth, it is costly to fix cavities and undertake any cosmetic procedures. As well, esthetic damage to the mouth can lead to social and employment issues for the meth user.

EFFECTS ON GENERAL HEALTH

In addition to tooth loss and gum disease, meth use can cause high blood pressure, increased respiration, hyperthermia, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, irregular heartbeat, and even permanent brain damage.

TREATMENT AND CARE

Treating clients with a meth addiction is usually a long, ongoing process involving:

- Education on the effects of the drug on oral care as well as resource materials for drug counselling and treatment for the addiction (abstinence)
- Early intervention to decrease damage, such as dietary counselling
- Treatment for tooth decay and gum disease
- Plaque control and application of fluoride
- Cosmetic procedures, in some cases



It is important for the meth user to:

- Seek drug counselling and treatment for the addiction
- Maintain a proper home care program, as directed by a dental professional
- Help stimulate saliva flow by sipping water, chewing sugarfree gum and sucking on ice chips
- Schedule regular dental hygiene appointments for check-ups and cleanings to remove bacterial plaque buildup

Helpful resources:

Centre for Addition and Mental Health Information
Centre – 1.800.463.6273 or www.camh.net

Kids Help Phone – 1.800.668.6868

Ontario Drug and Alcohol Registry of
Treatment – 1.800.565.8603

Street Involved Youth Program –
www.youthlink.ca/yskillzone.html

As professional health-care providers, dental hygienists are primarily concerned with promoting good oral health. Dental hygiene is among the largest of the regulated health-care professions in the province. In Ontario all dental hygienists are registered with the College of Dental Hygienists of Ontario, which regulates the profession to ensure the public receives safe and ongoing comprehensive oral care.

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