

# Meth Mouth

## The Effects Of Methamphetamine:

Dental problems are common among drug users. Many do not take care of their teeth on a regular basis and most do not see a dentist often.

Meth users face some specific issues with their teeth and mouth, partly due to the ingredients and method of use. Meth mouth includes the direct and side effects of the drug and lifestyle choices of the user. Dentists and dental hygienists are urged to become familiar with the symptoms and what precautions to take when treating an abuser. While the symptoms alone do not prove Meth use, taken together with other signs, they may help health workers diagnose abuse.

Image of dental damage due to Meth use

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Pictures Courtesy

USD Dental Hygiene

## Meth Ingredients and Method

Lithium, muriatic and sulfuric acids, ether, red phosphorus and lye - key ingredients in Meth manufacturing - are all corrosive and will cause skin burns even when used properly. When a person smokes Meth, these substances are heated, vaporized and swirl throughout the user's mouth. They irritate and burn the sensitive skin inside the mouth, create sores and lead to infection. Chronic Meth smokers have teeth rotted to the gum line from the continuous affect of the vapors on tooth enamel.

Snorting Meth also causes chemical damage to teeth. Snorting draws the caustic substances down the nasal passages, draining in the back of the throat and bathing the teeth with corrosive substances.

Injecting Meth has no direct impact on dental health, but as you will see, habitual use of the drug does have side effects that do lead to damage.

## Meth Mouth Symptoms

&loz;Dry Mouth - Saliva acts as a buffer against acidic substances in the mouth, neutralizing it and protecting teeth against acidic foods like lemons, acid from the gut or acidic plaque. The average person creates around one liter of saliva a day. If saliva production is reduced, oral bacteria levels can increase ten times over normal levels.

Meth dries out the salivary glands. Without saliva, the acidic substances can eat away at the minerals in tooth enamel, causing holes or weak spots that turn into cavities. Other medications dry the mouth but Meth is especially bad.

&loz;Tooth Decay - Meth users are notorious for trying to treat cottonmouth with lots of sugary soda. The bacteria that feed on the sugars in the mouth secrete acid, which leads to more tooth decay. Also, Meth users aren't likely to floss, brush and rinse when high.

A typical cavity starts in-between two teeth. It eventually invades the tooth and destroys it from the inside out. Crank decay invariably starts at the gum line - it eventually spreads around the entire tooth, eating swathes of enamel in its wake.

&loz;Cracked Teeth - Because the drug can make them feel anxious or nervous, causing them to clench or grind their teeth, regular Meth users may develop cracks in their teeth.

&loz;Gum Disease - Teeth and gums need blood to stay healthy. Meth causes the vessels that supply blood to oral tissues to shrink up. Reduced blood supply causes tissues to break down. With repeated shrinking, the blood vessels don't recover and tissues die.

#### Dental Health Workers Awareness

The exact rate of Meth mouth is unknown, but dentists who practice in areas where people have regular access to the drug are beginning to see a pattern. The following is from a January, 2003 article by Reuters Health Information:

"Dr. Eric Curtis, a dentist in Arizona, and a spokesman for the Academy of General Dentistry, reports, "I have a certain number of patients who are starting to show up with it." He adds that the patients it crops up in most commonly are teenagers. Dr. Curtis says that he does not treat the tooth decay and gum disease associated with Meth mouth any differently than he treats the conditions in other patients. However, if he believes his patient is using Meth, he will ask them to stop and he advised other dentists to do the same. If dentists relieve patients of their current dental problems but they continue to use the drug, chances are the same problems will reappear, he noted, "The cycle will occur and occur again." "

Dentists should also be aware that Meth has been shown to have dangerous interactions with common dental anesthetics. These, in turn, could cause major hypertensive episodes or other health problems. Also, anyone who suspects they may be working with a patient using Meth should be familiar with the signs of tweaking and how to deal with a tweaker.

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