

Getting Real About Meth

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It's easy to score. Kids think it's cool. But trying this drug "just one time" can lead to a devastating addiction. Could you spot the telltale signs if your teen were hooked?

The Facts About Meth

The frightening headlines and news stories -- "America's most dangerous drug," "a weapon of mass destruction," "an unprecedented epidemic and crisis" -- have faded. And recent trends are encouraging: Fewer middle and high school students are abusing meth; drug seizures and lab busts are on the decline. And dire predictions of a surge of "smurfs," "strawberry quick," and other candy-flavored types of meth designed to tempt younger kids haven't come true.

Those facts, however, offer little comfort to families that have been devastated by a teen's addiction -- and no reason for parents to let down their guard. Meth is no longer the new drug on the block but has seeped into the mainstream culture, making it an even more insidious threat. Production of homemade meth is down, but "ice" is pouring in from Mexico and Canada. Once largely confined to rural areas and the West Coast, it has now spread across the country. And whether it's AMC TV's *Breaking Bad*, about a struggling high school chemistry teacher who becomes a meth dealer to support his wife and son, or celebs who dis the drug even as they rave about the incredible rush, meth still has a grim allure for teens. What girl wouldn't be tempted when she hears the singer Fergie describe meth as "such a fun drug at first [because] you lose weight and look great for a while" -- and as "the hardest boyfriend I ever had to break up with"?

Then there's the seductive potency of the drug itself. Snorted, smoked, or injected, meth -- which is made by cooking the pseudoephedrine from cold pills with iodine, anhydrous ammonia (fertilizer), and other common chemicals -- releases a burst of dopamine, causing an intense euphoria that can last 6 to 24 hours. But the high comes from damaging the brain's pleasure centers, making users unable to feel good from anything except more meth. New research from Brookhaven National Laboratory suggests that the drug enters the brain as quickly as cocaine but affects more regions and lingers longer. Chronic abuse can lead to paranoia, hallucinations, and violent behavior. And the harm is long lasting; more than a year after going clean, users still show severe impairment of memory, judgment, and motor coordination similar to those suffering from Parkinson's disease.

As the following stories show, it's not only meth addicts who suffer: The collateral damage to families is immense. The good news is that by talking to your kids and making them aware of the risks, you can help them say no. The Meth Project (methproject.org), a nationwide prevention group that targets 12- to 17-year-olds, says it's helped reduce the number of first-time teen users with its TV, radio, print, billboard, and Internet ads that graphically depict the horrors of addiction. "We undertook a campaign in 2005 to 'unsell' meth, reaching 70 percent of teens three times a week with our theme, 'Not Even Once,'" says Peg Shea, executive director of the project's Montana branch. After two years, the state saw a 45 percent decrease in meth use among teens and a 62 percent drop in meth-related crimes. The group has also had an impact in Arizona, where 86 percent of parents report having discussed the drug with their teen during the past year, most of them prompted by one of the group's ads. "Parents need to be tuned in to

the dangers their kids are facing," says Shea. "And they need to let their kids know they're willing to discuss the problem." Read on to learn the signs of meth abuse, how to keep communication open, and other preventive measures so you can be your teen's first line of defense.