

The Augusta Chronicle

Powerful high from meth attracts users

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[Saturday, April 24, 2010](#)

Even short-term use of methamphetamine leads to tooth decay, lowered immunity, malnutrition, irreversible brain damage and delusional behavior.

The drug's ingredient list includes paint thinner and rubbing alcohol.

So why do people do it?

For starters, meth delivers one of the strongest and most enduring highs of all illicit drugs.

Dopamine is the chemical in the brain that delivers pleasure. Meth creates 10 to 12 times the normal levels of dopamine in the brain.

"It's such a powerful substance," said Jim Langford, the executive director of the Georgia Meth Project.

Other reasons for doing the drug lie with the individual.

"Some people quit right away; others are almost in love with the drug," said Steve Winkleman, a senior counselor with the Insight Program in Augusta.

Winkleman has been counseling recovering drug addicts for years and has seen firsthand the effects meth has on a person and the user's family. In Winkleman's experience, most people who get hooked on meth are already doing other drugs or drinking alcohol.

The source of drug abuse is usually dissatisfaction with the status quo, unhappiness and loneliness. Drugs give someone a false sense of feeling better about life and an escape of sorts from the humdrum routine, Winkleman said.

As the drug abuse progresses, meth users quickly build up a tolerance for the drug that increases the frequency and quantity of the drug they need to get a high, according to the Georgia Meth Project.

Meth users, called "tweakers," suffer vitamin deficiency disorders and extreme weight loss because they don't eat. Delusional behavior, such as attempting to claw off invisible bugs, accompanies days without sleep.

"Their perception is very skewed on what reality is," Winklemann said.

Langford has examples. There's the guy who cut open the back of his leg to get the spider out. A man who chased cars because his dog told him to. Women who pluck out their eyebrows and eyelashes, then pick at their faces until they're shredded.

As the high diminishes, withdrawal symptoms appear, including depression, aggression, fatigue and paranoia.

Long-term and chronic meth use creates physical problems that are sometimes permanent. Users experience confusion and might have auditory hallucinations, such as whispers outside a door. The kidneys, lungs and heart are all affected, and damaged brain vessels can cause strokes.

What prompts them to kick the habit is unique to each person.

Typically, it's either intervention by a loved one or a "rock bottom" experience. It could be neglecting a child in favor of the drug, attacking someone or getting beat up, stealing or promiscuous behavior.

"It's becoming completely demoralized and doing things you promised yourself you would never do," Winklemann said. "There is a lot of guilt and shame associated with that."