



It's important to exercise some caution in the face of sensational media reports, points out Nick Boyce, harm-reduction coordinator at the AIDS Committee of Toronto (ACT). "Not everyone who tries crystal meth becomes addicted or suffers serious consequences," noted Boyce at the launch of "Hi, my name is Tina," the crystal-meth awareness campaign ACT has prepared in consultation with community activists and other social agencies. ("Tina" is a nickname for crystal meth in the gay community.) "The connection between meth and HIV is very complex," he adds.

David, HIV-positive since the 1980s, also suggests there's more at play. "While I was a meth addict, for years I continued to use condoms." Over time though, he says, the "barebacking" phenomenon -- men consciously choosing to forgo protection -- seemed to become more visible and accepted. Eventually, he joined in. "I just assumed all those guys were positive, too." But that wasn't always the case. "One guy begged me to fuck him bareback, but when I asked his status, he said he was HIV-negative."

Barebacking has been studied by New York's Center for Health, Identity, Behavior and Prevention Studies (CHIBPS). Their research indicates that contributing factors include fatigue from decades of dealing with HIV; crystal's reduction of sexual inhibitions; availability of Viagra to counteract "crystal dick" (inability to maintain an erection, a common meth malady); and the emergence of the internet as a way to meet sexual partners.

In a video interview posted on New York University's website, CHIBPS director Perry Halkitis notes that "people who are vulnerable psychologically to begin with, who are feeling the burdens of poverty, depression or stigma, are much more likely to use this drug to self-medicate."

How could someone put themselves at so much risk, drug or no drug? According to Frank, "Crystal removes your capacity for reflection. Whatever negative emotions you might normally feel -- shame, guilty, worry -- on crystal it becomes easy to just forget about them." Risky sex seemed the least of his concerns -- he became homeless while addicted to the drug.

Not all meth addicts become focused on sex. Justin, a thirtysomething former user, claims the drug didn't lead him to abandon safer-sex practices. "I'm not saying I never fucked someone without a condom while high -- but it was pretty rare. Maybe once or twice a year." He thinks aiming for a perfect record of safe sex is not realistic: "I slip up about as much today, even with crystal out of the picture."

ACT's new meth campaign -- soon to be accessible online at [www.himynameistina.com](http://www.himynameistina.com) -- acknowledges that unprotected sex is compelling to some Tina users. In addition to info on how to use crystal more safely and resources for those who wish to quit, the website contains non-judgmental health information specifically for men who bareback. Given the high risks associated with unprotected fucking, doesn't that contradict ACT's prevention mandate?

No, says Boyce. "Most people who engage in unprotected sex know they're at greater risk -- but they still do it. We need to understand why. Not talking about it certainly won't make it go away."

Meanwhile, those who have escaped from crystal's clutches struggle to reclaim their sexual selves. David decided barebacking wasn't worth the risk. "Fear of Hepatitis C was my wake-up call. A friend of mine got it from fucking someone without a condom. I figured, it's hard enough with one virus to deal with -- who needs another?"

Frank says he no longer feels the urge for compulsive or risky sex. "On crystal, I needed to get fucked over and over -- once was never enough. It's different today. Sex is more satisfying -- and more joyful. Instead of engaging in a mechanical process, I'm actually connecting with another human being."

*\*NAMES IN THIS ARTICLE HAVE BEEN CHANGED.*

CRYSTAL METH PHOTO: US DRUG ENFORCEMENT ADMINISTRATION