

# Views: The Icy Highway

**M**ethamphetamine is currently the drug of choice among members of the gay community.

More frequently than we might gather from the documented histories of drug use in this country, amphetamines in their various forms have been the most frequently consumed illegal drug in the U.S.

According to Philip Jenkins's 1999 book *Synthetic Panics: The Symbolic Politics of Designer Drugs* (New York University Press), amphetamines were "archetypal designer drugs" first synthesized in the late nineteenth century: "The most popular drugs of the twentieth-century have been amphetamines. Although heroin has had a dramatic resurgence over the past decade, it is the amphetamine which has remained at the front of the illegal drug popularity race."

Going back to the beginning, Benzadrine was first synthesized in 1887. This led to the 1920s creation of Dexedrine. D-phenyl-isopropyl-methylamine hydrochloride, better known as methamphetamine, was also synthesized during the 1920s.

Benzadrine was given to soldiers during World War II when they had to perform with little sleep. Factory workers were given the drug to keep them productive during long hours so they could survive their wartime swing shifts. Amphetamines were later considered a wonder drug by those in the trucking industry. It likewise continues to be a favorite artificial motivator among stressed-out

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students.

Crystal methamphetamine is vastly popular because it mimics the brain's natural catecholamines such as dopamine, epinephrine, and norepinephrine. These affect cardiovascular functioning and the central nervous system, causing the brain to release more feel-good chemicals.

"Crank" and "crystal" are both amphetamines, but each is prepared with a different solvent. While crank is more powdery, crystal (a.k.a. "rock") is a harder crystallized form cut with a razor blade. Both are usually snorted or can be mixed with a liquid and injected directly into the bloodstream.

My mother told me that amphetamines were handed out to women like candy in the 1960s as appetite suppressants. She first realized their power while cleaning windows at our house at 3:00 A.M. Then she threw them away.

The drug of choice within

the gay community throughout the 1990s and into the new millennium is methylene-dioxymethamphetamine, better known as Ecstasy. The drug was first synthesized in 1912 by the Merck Corporation to treat lethargy. Its use later increased in the 1950s as, believe it or not, an adjunct to psychotherapy.

Beware: some have compared the chemical compound in Ecstasy to that of SSRIs (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors) such as Prozac, Paxil, and Celexa. The Ecstasy-Prozac comparison is like comparing apples and oranges. Each has a completely different effect on the brain. Those claiming that amphetamines help relieve their depressive symptoms are in for an unpleasant surprise down the road.

A serious problem with the study of illegal drugs and their effects is a great lack of exploration of its role in sexual functioning and pleasure. It took the medical establishment almost two decades to point out the correlation between drug use and HIV infection. "Get high, get stupid, get AIDS" should have been one of the main thrusts of initial HIV education. But our culture's notorious lack of maturity and squeamishness regarding anal sex contributed to avoidance of identifying the role drugs play in the sexual realm. No wonder Europeans laugh at us until they pass out.

Cocaine has long been glorified as an aphrodisiac because it works on brain receptors related to sexual response and pleasure. Similarly, Ecstasy can often dramati-

cally increase sexual pleasure in addition to pepping you up on the dance floor. Ecstasy and crystal meth make you feel *fabulous*.

Studies of male prostitutes have shown that cocaine and crystal methamphetamine are frequently used by customers as a means to increase sexual arousal, intensify orgasm, and reduce the sexual refractory period in order to experience multiple ejaculations within a smaller timeframe. If there was ever a "good reason" to use crystal, that is certainly it.

Unfortunately, the same drugs that bring pleasure can also bring serious health problems. The most pronounced are dehydration and obliviousness to dangers: your central nervous system is so overloaded that it cannot warn the brain to slow the body down. Some guys have literally dropped dead on the dance floor with body temperatures reaching 107 degrees Fahrenheit. This is extremely rare but it does happen.

The most pervasive effects involve the way the brain is trained to produce its chemicals in a non-drug aroused state. Extensive use of amphetamines may result in a brain that no longer recognizes the need to produce some of its own neurotransmitters. Like the shrinking testicles of the man who chronically uses anabolic-androgenic (testosterone based) steroids, the chronic amphetamine user can be left with a brain that permanently does not produce adequate amounts of serotonin.

Other studies have shown

that subjects who are classified as "heavy users" of Ecstasy – those who use the club drug three times per week or more for at least six months – are ten times more likely to develop Major Depressive Disorder than members of control groups. The results also suggest that this effect may be irreversible. We may currently be looking at a generation of gay men who will experience chronic biological depression once the party is over.

But scare tactics regarding drug and alcohol abuse and dependence do not work well. We all like to have a good time, and we are all immortal – at least while we are still young. Education is the key to safety. It is more important to understand the risks you may be taking so you can make informed choices about drug and alcohol use than to blow off the naïve and impotent "Just Say No" message.

Just know what you are getting into. Knowledge is power, so take good care of yourselves. Have an excellent year 2004. ▼

Copyright © 2003 Alexander Renault. All rights reserved. Alexander Renault is the pen name for a writer who has published in multiple genres. He has worked in the mental health and drug and alcohol fields for the past fifteen years. Mr. Renault is currently editing the non-fiction anthology *Walking Higher: Gay Men Write About the Deaths of Their Mothers from Renault Publishing, Inc.* He invites you to visit him at [AlexanderRenault.com](http://AlexanderRenault.com).

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