Ice use increasing among Australia’s drug users

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Use of ice (crystal methamphetamine) by drug users in Australia increased significantly between 2010 and 2011 according to research on emerging drug trends by the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC) at the University of New South Wales.

The research, which examined trends in drug use among both people who inject drugs and regular ecstasy users, found increases in ice use in both these groups. Forty five per cent of people who inject drugs had used ice in the previous six months (39 per cent in 2010) as had 26 per cent of regular ecstasy users (17 per cent in 2010).

Meanwhile, ecstasy use continues to lose popularity: 27 per cent of regular ecstasy users nominated ecstasy as their drug of choice in 2011, down from 37 per cent in 2010.

A report released last month (September 13) by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNDOC) found the use of amphetamine-type stimulants such as ecstasy and methamphetamine is surging around the world. Amphetamine type stimulants now rank as the world’s second-most widely used type of drug after cannabis, surpassing heroin and cocaine. Australia should remain alert to these increases and continue to monitor use of these substances.

Locally, the findings on increased methamphetamine use were uncovered by the Illicit Drug Reporting System (IDRS) and the Ecstasy and Related Drugs Reporting System (EDRS) - Australia’s largest drug monitoring systems. Key results from the 2011 findings will be released at the National Drug Trends Conference on Monday (October 17).

Drug Trends’ Chief Investigator and NDARC Senior Lecturer, Dr Lucy Burns, said while ice use had not returned to 2006 levels, the use of the drug by almost half of people who inject drugs and one-quarter of ecstasy users was a worrying trend with significant mental health and social implications.

“Methamphetamine is associated with psychosis, aggressive behaviour and unpredictability,” said Dr Burns.

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“We are already seeing this reflected in self-reported mental health and social problems in the survey.”

For example, self-reported drug-induced psychosis among people who inject drugs more than doubled between 2010 and 2011, rising from three per cent to seven per cent.

Among regular ecstasy users, 28 per cent reported that their drug use caused repeated problems with family, friends or colleagues (up from 20 per cent of users in 2010) and 44 per cent found themselves in ‘at risk’ situations while under the influence of drugs (up from 38 per cent in 2010).

Dr Burns said there were many factors behind the increase in the use of ice and other methamphetamines, including reports out of the US indicating it was becoming increasingly easy to manufacture very pure ice without needing special laboratories.

Within Australia, the IDRS and EDRS are the national early warning systems designed to alert authorities to such changes.

“With these systems in place we can detect emerging drug trends and this allows for governments, law enforcement and health workers to plan and implement effectively targeted policy to reduce drug related harm throughout Australia,” said Dr Burns.


When: Monday October 17 2011, 8.45 am – 5.00pm

Where: The Australian National Maritime Museum
2 Murray Street Darling Harbour Sydney NSW 2000


A media conference will be held at 11.20am in the Members Lounge.

Other key findings:

- Heroin remains the drug of choice for the majority of people who inject drugs (53 per cent).
- Ice is the drug of choice for nine per cent of people who inject drugs (up from four per cent in 2010).
- 11 per cent of people who inject drugs reported ice was the drug they injected most often in the previous month, up from five per cent in 2010.
- There was an increase in the number of people who inject drugs who reported experiencing scarring and bruising, up from 36 per cent of users in 2010 to 45 per cent in 2011. 37 per cent also reported difficulty injecting, up from 31 per cent in 2010. There was a drop in the number of people who inject drugs using shared injecting equipment,
from 39 per cent of users in 2010 to 25 per cent in 2011. There was also a drop in those reusing their own injecting equipment, from 68 per cent in 2010 to 58 per cent in 2011.

- Cannabis and cocaine were the drugs of choice for 20 per cent and 14 per cent of regular ecstasy users respectively.
- There was increased use of LSD and mushrooms among regular ecstasy users, with 46 per cent reporting use of LSD in the previous six months, up from 38 per cent in 2010. This is the highest recorded use of LSD among regular ecstasy users since the EDRS began surveying users in 2003. Mushrooms were used by 29 per cent of regular ecstasy users in the six months prior to interview, up from 18 per cent in 2010.
- Other drugs recording increased use among regular ecstasy users between 2010 and 2011 include benzodiazapines (from 32 to 43 per cent of users); ketamine (from 12 to 16 per cent); and MDA (from five per cent to 12 per cent).
- Use of chemical drugs such as 2CB, DMT and Mescaline also increased among regular ecstasy users, with one exception: mephedrone (from 16 per cent in 2010 to 13 per cent in 2011).

About the IDRS and EDRS

The Illicit Drug Reporting System (IDRS) monitors the price, purity and availability and patterns of use of illicit drugs such as heroin, methamphetamines, cocaine and other opioids among people who inject drugs. The IDRS comprises three components: interviews with a sentinel group of people who regularly inject drugs; interviews with key experts; and analysis of indicator data sources related to illicit drugs.

Based on the methodology of the IDRS, the Ecstasy and Related Drugs Reporting System (EDRS) monitors the price, purity, availability and patterns of use of illicit drugs such as ecstasy, methamphetamines, cocaine, ketamine, GHB and LSD among people who regularly use ecstasy.

These surveys of drug users are designed to provide early warnings of trends. The results of the IDRS and EDRS are **NOT** representative of drug use among the general population.

The IDRS and EDRS projects are conducted by the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre (NDARC).

About methamphetamine:

- Ice/crystal fact sheet
- Methamphetamine: forms and use patterns
- Methamphetamine supply in Australia
- Methamphetamine psychosis
- Methamphetamine use and health