

ICE/CRYSTAL

What is ice/crystal?

In recent years in Australia, some strong forms of methamphetamine (see the Amphetamine Fact Sheet to find out more about methamphetamine) have started to become more available and more widely used. One of these forms is known on the street as 'ice'. Ice is a high purity crystalline form of methamphetamine, which is also called 'shabu', 'crystal' or 'crystal meth'. Ice has only recently become popular in Australia, although its use has been common in some parts of Asia and the USA for a long time.

Where does ice/crystal come from?

Most of the ice we get here has actually been manufactured in China but is sometimes transported to Australia via other Asian countries such as the Philippines or Indonesia. We have seen much more ice being imported into Australia in recent years. In the 2000/01 financial year, the Australian Customs Service seized more than 80 Kilograms of ice at the Australian border. Since then, several large seizures of ice have been made at the border, including 233 kg in 2003, and a further 125 kg in 2004. When there is more good quality ice being imported, it puts pressure on the people who manufacture methamphetamine in Australia to produce a higher quality product, so the purity of methamphetamine powder ('speed') made here has been increasing over the last few years.

What does it look like?

Ice is consistently described as large, translucent (colourless) to white crystals or a coarse crystalline powder. Ice is usually sold in 'points' (0.1 gram) because it is so strong that only a tiny bit is used at a time.

How do people use it?

In parts of the world where ice has had a long history of use (e.g., Japan, the Philippines, Hawaii), it has traditionally been smoked in a glass pipe that is similar to the kinds of pipes that crack cocaine is smoked in. Some people who use ice in Australia smoke it through this kind of pipe, whereas others mix it with cannabis and smoke it through a bong ('snow cones'), or heat it on aluminium foil ('chase') and inhale the vapours. But many people who use ice in Australia inject it. Ice easily dissolves in water in the same way that any other methamphetamine form does (i.e., speed or base). Ice can also be swallowed or snorted, but these ways of taking ice are less common.

Why isn't ice/crystal made here?

Although, in theory, anyone who makes methamphetamine in Australia could produce ice, most of the really pure crystalline ice is thought to be imported. This is simply because ice is more difficult to make, and most local manufacturers aren't familiar with how to make it. What is made here is usually a powder (usually called 'speed'), or a damp or oily powder that is often called 'base' (see Amphetamine Fact Sheet).

Base is a sticky, gluggy, waxy or oily form of damp powder, paste or crystal that often has a yellow or brownish hue. It is oily because the first step in the methamphetamine manufacturing process produces methamphetamine base, which is an oil. An oil would not be popular in Australian illicit drug markets, because it cannot be easily injected or snorted. Therefore, manufacturers convert methamphetamine base (oil) into methamphetamine hydrochloride (salt or crystal). To successfully complete this process requires considerable chemistry expertise, and consequently, sometimes the final product still contains some of the methamphetamine oil and other reagents used in the chemical reaction, which gives the final product an oily or damp texture.

Even though ice looks different from 'speed' and 'base', they all contain methamphetamine, and they all have pretty similar effects. Any differences in the effects of ice are a result of its high purity. When you are taking ice, you are taking a really large hit of methamphetamine in one go, and this can alter the way the drug makes you feel, and the type of side-effects that you get.



How many people use ice/crystal?

Ice has become more popular in Australia over the past few years. Back in the 1990s, the use of ice among drug users was pretty rare. However, based on surveys of ecstasy users and injecting drug users, the proportion of regular drug users who take ice has increased dramatically from less than a few per cent in the mid-to-late 1990s, to over one-third in 2004.

The most recent nation-wide estimates of consumption come from the 2001 national survey of drug use (i.e., the National Drug Strategy Household Survey). According to this survey, 3.4% of Australian adults had taken methamphetamine in the year prior to being surveyed. This includes all forms of methamphetamine, such as powder or 'speed', 'base' and 'ice'. Among current methamphetamine users, about one-third had taken ice (38%), or around 1.3% of the Australian adult population.

We also know that ice appeals to a wide range of illicit drug users, including people who inject drugs like heroin and cocaine, and people who take drugs in the nightclub/dance party scene, like ecstasy and ketamine.

What are the short- and long-term effects of ice/crystal?

The short and long-term effects of all forms of methamphetamine, whether it is ice, base or speed you are talking about, are the same. These side effects include feeling dependent on the drug, sleep disturbances, weight loss, feeling scattered or agitated, and being depressed or anxious - particularly when the person is 'coming down' off the drug. Some people also go through phases of experiencing methamphetamine psychosis, where they feel they can't trust people, and may see or hear things that aren't really there. These symptoms can become very serious, and are made worse with continued use of ice. It is advisable to stop taking ice if people experience these symptoms, and to seek help from a medical professional.

Refer to the Amphetamine Fact Sheet to get more information on the types of problems people who use ice could expect. The only difference between the side-effects from ice and those from other forms of methamphetamine is that, because ice is such a strong form of methamphetamine, all the effects and side-effects will be (1) more likely to happen; and (2) more intense than normal speed. Ice is a dangerous drug, and we know from the experience of places like Hawaii that people who use it are going to experience a whole range of physical and emotional side-effects.

