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## UNDERSTANDING METH

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## Meth Evils

Methamphetamine is perhaps the most destructive drug ever encountered. It is easy and inexpensive to make, extremely potent, and highly addictive. It is dangerous to make and dangerous to use. It destroys the mind and the body. It damages the unborn and places children at grave risk of harm. It spreads HIV/AIDS and hepatitis B and C. It endangers law enforcement and other first responders. It saps our resources. It seems to destroy everything and everyone in its path.

This section on “meth evils” deals with many of the fundamental harms caused by meth:

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## Meth destroys the mind [Back to top](#)

Meth is one of the most addictive drugs ever encountered. It is said that just one or two uses of meth may lead to an intense addiction that is extremely difficult to overcome. In the short term, meth

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produces a brief but intense “rush,” followed by a sense of euphoria that lasts up to twelve hours. Meth produces these feelings by releasing high levels of the neurotransmitter dopamine into areas of the brain that regulate feelings of pleasure.

Even in the short term, meth has toxic effects on the brain. In animal studies, scientists have found that a single high dose of meth can damage nerve terminals in the regions of the brain containing dopamine.

In the long term, meth use leads to meth addiction, altering the brain and causing the user to seek out and use meth in a compulsive manner. Chronic meth use leads to increased tolerance of the drug and damages the ability of the brain to produce and release dopamine. As a result, the user must take higher or more frequent doses of meth in order to experience the pleasurable effects of meth or even just to feel normal.

Chronic meth users commonly exhibit violent behavior, anxiety, confusion, and insomnia. They sometimes become psychotic, experiencing paranoia, visual and auditory hallucinations, mood disturbances, delusions, violent outbursts, and homicidal or suicidal thoughts. Serious meth addicts often have the sensation that insects are crawling on or under their skin, and this causes them to pick at their skin incessantly, causing sores and infections. These imaginary insects are commonly referred to as “meth bugs.”

## **Meth destroys the body** [Back to top](#)

Meth use can do great harm to the user’s heart and lungs. Specifically, meth use can cause rapid heart rate, irregular heartbeat, increased blood pressure, and irreversible damage to small blood vessels in the brain, sometimes leading to strokes. Chronic meth use may also result in inflammation of the heart lining and – among users who inject the drug – damaged blood vessels and skin abscesses.

Because many meth users lose their appetite, they often lose weight and become emaciated. Meth also destroys enamel, causing users’ teeth to rot away. The combination of weight loss, rotting teeth, and sores caused by picking at imaginary “meth bugs,” along with inattention to personal hygiene, often give chronic meth users a poor physical appearance.

## **Meth use harms the unborn** [Back to top](#)

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The effects of methamphetamine on the developing fetus can be severe and life threatening. Although research on this subject is limited, those studies that exist suggest that methamphetamine abuse during pregnancy may result in prenatal complications, increased rates of premature delivery, and altered neonatal behavioral patterns such as abnormal reflexes and extreme irritability. In addition, there is evidence suggesting that meth use during pregnancy may be linked to congenital deformities.

A March 2004 story in the *Chicago Tribune* discussed research on this subject by Dr. Rizwan Shah at Children's Hospital in Des Moines, Iowa. Dr. Shah has followed 370 children born during the last 10 years to mothers who took meth during pregnancy. Here are some of her findings:

- At birth, the babies of mothers who used meth during pregnancy are like "dishrags." They are "sleepy, with decreased muscle tone, depressed, without a good suck."
- Within three weeks, these babies come to resemble "crack babies," with "tremors, muscle stiffness, irritability, hypersensitivity to touch . . . and sensory integration dysfunction."
- By the age of two, most of these babies recover relatively normal function. But soon thereafter, they start having difficulty with language and behavior.
- By the age of eight, a notable number of these children start having angry outbursts that erupt without cause and can last as long as fifteen minutes.

Fortunately, Dr. Shah believes these problems can be overcome in most cases if the child's condition is properly diagnosed early on. "Only Future Will Tell Full Damage Speed Wrecks on Kids," *Chicago Tribune*, March 7, 2004.

Because meth use causes pregnant women to neglect their health, prenatal nutrition and prenatal care are also seriously neglected. The fetus is likely to also be exposed to alcohol and other damaging substances.

## **Meth spreads HIV/AIDS and hepatitis B and C** [Back to top](#)

Meth use contributes to the spread of HIV/AIDS and hepatitis B and C because addicts who inject meth spread these diseases when they re-use contaminated syringes, needles, and other paraphernalia. Meth also leads to unsafe sex practices and other risky behaviors.

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## **Making meth is dangerous** [Back to top](#)

As noted above, almost all of the meth consumed in Illinois is manufactured locally in small, makeshift production sites found in houses, barns, vehicles, and other locations. These meth labs are so extremely hazardous that federal law allows only highly trained personnel wearing “hazmat” suits, oxygen masks, and other protective equipment to approach them.

One factor that makes meth labs so dangerous is the highly volatile nature of the hazardous chemicals used to make meth. Carelessness in the handling and storage of these chemicals frequently causes fires and explosions. Meth cooks often seal windows to keep the odors created by meth manufacture from escaping and giving away the lab location. This practice increases the risk of fire and explosion by diminishing ventilation of flammable gasses.

Fires and explosions are so common in meth labs that – according to some estimates – they are responsible for roughly fifteen percent of lab discoveries. This fact has led some law enforcement authorities to comment, only half in jest, that it’s easy to find a meth by just looking for the fire.

These fires and explosions are often fatal, often killing the meth makers themselves and sometimes killing others as well. In November 2003, for example, a meth lab fire in Kalamazoo, Michigan, injured the man making the meth, Tracy Schlotterback, injured his daughter, and killed his wife. In January 2004, Schlotterback pleaded no contest to charges of involuntary manslaughter and second-degree child abuse.

In addition to posing fire and explosion hazards, meth labs produce toxic fumes, vapors and spills. Not only are the chemicals used to make meth hazardous, but the compounds and byproducts which result from its manufacture are toxic. Exposure to low levels of some meth ingredients may produce headache, nausea, dizziness, and fatigue. Exposure to high levels can produce shortness of breath, coughing, chest pain, dizziness, lack of coordination, eye and tissue irritation, chemical burns to the skin, eyes, mouth, and nose, and – ultimately – death.

Moreover, corrosive substances may cause injury through inhalation or contact with the skin. Solvents can affect the central

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nervous system and irritate the skin, mucous membranes, and respiratory track. Chronic exposure to the chemicals typically used in meth manufacture may cause cancer; damage the brain, liver, kidney, spleen, and immunologic system; and result in birth defects.

## **Meth labs endanger law enforcement officers** [Back to top](#)

Meth labs and meth users pose special dangers to law enforcement officers and other first responders. Federal law expressly forbids law enforcement officers from entering a structure or vehicle if they know it contains a meth lab. As noted above, only law enforcement officers with specialized training and equipment are allowed to do so; these officers are called “clan lab certified” because they have received training and certification that allows them to enter clandestine methamphetamine labs.

Unfortunately, law enforcement officers carrying out their normal duties sometimes enter a structure or vehicle containing meth-making chemicals, a meth lab, or meth waste without knowing in advance what they are about to encounter. This puts them in an extremely dangerous, unstable, and unpredictable situation, and, unfortunately, they do not always escape unharmed.

Although law enforcement officers who enter structures containing meth labs face the multiple dangers of explosions, fires, guard dogs, and booby traps, the most commonly-reported injuries stem from inhalation of dangerous chemicals. Here are a few recent examples:

- Summit, Illinois – February 2003. Police officers in this Chicago suburb (just west of Midway Airport) responded to reports of an apparent explosion, encountered an injured man in the lobby of an apartment building, followed a trail of his blood to a third-floor apartment, and entered the apartment where a meth lab had apparently exploded. Nine police officers were overcome by fumes, taken to local hospitals, and later released.
- Colorado Springs, Colorado – January 2004. Police officers entered a structure containing a suspected meth lab, were overcome by fumes, and were sent to a local hospital. Media reports say the officers were overcome by phosphine gas, a potentially fatal substance sometimes produced by malfunctioning labs that use the red phosphorous method of meth production.

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- Sapulpa, Oklahoma – December 2003. Three police officers investigating a reported drug overdose encountered meth-making materials and were overcome by fumes and sent to an area hospital.
- Hobe Sound, Florida – December 2003. Police officers investigating a suspected meth lab in a mini-storage unit were overcome by fumes.

In some of these cases, better training of law enforcement officers in meth-lab awareness and safety may have prevented injuries to law enforcement officers.

## **Meth makers and users endanger law enforcement officers** [Back to top](#)

Dealing with criminals is always dangerous, but dealing with meth makers and meth users poses special challenges. Meth makers and users are often armed and dangerous, and meth use makes them unpredictable, paranoid and even delusional. This combination of dangers poses an acute threat to the lives and safety of law enforcement officers, as illustrated by these recent, tragic examples:

- Devol, Oklahoma – December 2003. Oklahoma Highway Patrol Officer Nikky Green was shot dead by a motorist suspected of manufacturing methamphetamine.
- O'ahu, Hawaii – March 2003. Police Officer Glen Gaspar was shot to death during a struggle with a murder suspect who, according to police, was high on meth.
- Wayside, Alabama – March 2002. Game Warden Jimmy Hutto died from a gunshot wound sustained in the investigation of a suspected meth lab. In December 2003, defendant David Mosher pleaded guilty to murder and was sentenced to life in prison.
- Vallejo, California – April 2000. Rookie Officer Jeff Azuar was shot dead by Joseph Teitgen, who, according to his attorneys, was experiencing methamphetamine-induced paranoia at the time. Officer Azuar was at Teitgen's home to serve an arrest warrant when Teitgen fled, Officer Azuar pursued, and Teitgen fired the fatal shot.

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- Bruceville, Indiana – November 2003. Indiana State Trooper Brent Clark was fired upon by Charles Rickard, a suspected meth maker who was fleeing from Clark in a wooded area. Rickard was later arrested and charged with manufacturing methamphetamine and resisting arrest.
- LaCrosse, Wisconsin – December 2003. Crawford County Sheriff Bob Ostrander was overcome by ammonia fumes during a struggle with a suspect when the suspect opened a container of anhydrous ammonia in an effort to escape. According to law enforcement authorities, it is not uncommon for meth makers to use their toxic chemicals as weapons against law enforcement officers.

## **Meth harms the environment** [Back to top](#)

Every pound of meth manufactured produces up to six pounds of toxic meth waste – waste that meth makers routinely pour down drains, toss onto roadsides, or dump in ditches or farm fields. Every location where meth makers deposit meth waste is a toxic waste site that may endanger not only the natural environment but also any persons who come into contact with the waste.

It has been reported that National Forest Service employees who have been in contact with meth dump sites have become ill. The waste from red phosphorous meth labs contains chemicals such as lye, red phosphorus, hydriodic acid and iodine. Some of this hazardous waste is dumped directly into domestic water wells, farmland, and mine shafts, creating broader public health risks from contaminated water. In California, chemicals from large meth lab dump sites have killed livestock, contaminated streams, and destroyed large areas of trees and vegetation.

## **Meth saps resources** [Back to top](#)

Although it would be difficult to calculate the millions or billions of dollars that the methamphetamine epidemic costs the state of Illinois and its citizens every year, any such calculation would have to take account of the following facts:

- Dismantling meth labs is a massive drain on law enforcement resources because, by law, four highly trained law enforcement officers must respond to each and every meth lab encountered.

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- Crimes committed by meth makers and meth users – including violent offenses, domestic abuse, property crimes, and identity theft – impose significant costs on law enforcement and, more importantly, on the victims of such crimes.
- The arrest and prosecution of so many meth users has led to overcrowding of jails and prisons run by local, state, and federal authorities. The cost of housing and caring for meth defendants – many of whom have severe medical and dental problems – has placed an especially heavy burden on county budgets in Illinois. Because meth causes teeth to rot, the cost of prisoner dental care alone can be significant.
- State and federal court dockets are overwhelmed with meth cases.
- Persons driving under the influence of meth cause traffic accidents, imposing costs on insurance companies and – ultimately – their customers, as well as police departments, fire departments, emergency rooms, and other medical providers.
- Fire departments must bear the cost of responding to the many fires and explosions caused by meth lab accidents.
- Physical problems caused by meth lead meth addicts – most of them without resources or insurance – to seek medical help in local emergency rooms and publicly-financed healthcare facilities.
- Hospital burn units face rising costs as they treat the victims of meth lab fires and explosions. The burn unit at University Hospitals in Iowa City treated 37 people from 2000 to 2002 for injuries related to meth, many which were the result of meth lab fires and explosions. The thirty-three people treated for such injuries between January 2002 and November 2003 had bills totaling \$2.2 million. “Financial Tab is Incalculable; Human Toll is Tragic,” *Des Moines Register*, November 23, 2003.
- Social problems caused by meth use have overwhelmed public and private social service providers. For example, the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services has had to find foster care for a growing number of “meth orphans” –

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children whose meth-addicted parents can no longer care for them. This process is difficult and expensive.

- Schools face added costs involved in educating the children of meth addicts, many of whom have suffered physical, emotional, and psychological harm stemming from their parents' behavior.
- Because meth users are usually indigent, the cost of caring for children born to meth-addicted mothers ultimately falls on taxpayers.
- Widespread theft of meth-making materials such as cold medications and lithium batteries has imposed additional costs on retailers throughout Illinois.
- Theft of anhydrous ammonia – and efforts to prevent such theft – have imposed additional costs on farmers and farm supply plants.
- As meth addiction spreads, employers throughout the state must deal with employees who are too sick to work effectively or work at all. Like other drug users, meth addicts account for significant levels of workplace theft, tardiness, low productivity, and high turnover.
- Similarly, meth addicts are more likely to cause workplace accidents than their counterparts, and the Iowa Drug Policy Office reports that a co-worker is injured in four out of every ten accidents caused by drug users. "High on the Job: Drug Users Cost Employers Money, Productivity," *Sioux City Journal*, December 18, 2003.

These are just some of the more obvious burdens stemming from the meth crisis in Illinois. Although the total cost of the meth epidemic to the state of Illinois and its citizens would be difficult to calculate, these factors suggest that the cost is intolerably high.

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