

Breaking the ice



A relatively new drug in Britain nick-named crystal meth, or ice, can have devastating effects, not only on the addicts, but also the frontline police officers who discover the explosive 'meth kitchens' used to make the drug. Syreeta Lund reports

You may just smell something unpleasant near a house – possibly like bleach or ammonia or a strong solvent. You could find large quantities of household chemicals, such as drain cleaner, and inside there may be rubber tubing and plastic buckets.

It may look relatively harmless, but this could be a crystal meth laboratory and it could be as explosive as a bomb factory. "For frontline officers the big concern is around the explosive environment created by a meth kitchen. Imagine if the lab is based in a block of flats somewhere urban, then you have a bigger problem as they sometimes literally go bang," says Sgt Victoria Machin, secretary of the ACPO national methamphetamine working group.

There are no official figures as to how prevalent the drug is nationally in the UK, but ACPO has gathered police intelligence which suggests that small-scale meth labs are popping up all over the country.

In the US, law enforcement agencies estimate that 12.3 million

people had tried meth by 2003. The government in Britain has recognised the potential danger of the drug and re-classified it from a Class B to Class A drug, attracting severe penalties.

Simon Bray, ACPO lead on methamphetamine and commander in the Met, believes the drug is enough of a threat for officers to be extremely wary and, alongside SOCA (Serious and Organised Crime Agency), they have already issued forces with a poster and aide memoire with information on meth labs and what an officer should do if they come across one.

"Although meth is thankfully not yet a very common drug in the UK, we can't afford to be complacent, as there does seem to be more of it around. Experience of other countries shows it can take hold very quickly.

"It is now a Class A drug and we're keen that officers feed back any intelligence on its use or availability. We are also concerned that first responders do not turn up at a meth lab without realising that it's a very dangerous place to be. If

Photography: Lisa Ryszkowska

the premises looks like it might be a lab, then officers need to treat it as dangerous, and get out quickly. We are working to provide some national operating procedures for front line officers and these should be available soon, he says," he says SOCA and police forces have dealt with shutting down around five meth labs in the UK, including a commercial production facility in the last 14 months.

The locations of the labs can vary from cities to more rural areas, such as Hampshire.

In January 2007 two men, David Walker, of Spring Hill, Ventnor and

GET OUT, STAY OUT!**METHAMPHETAMINE LABS ARE DANGEROUS**

What may indicate a lab: chemicals, chemical containers, cold cure medication packs, lithium batteries, glass jars, and electric hot plates, red/brown stained coffee filters, iodine; smells of solvent, burnt rubber, cat urine or ammonia.

What you should do: advise personnel to leave the site immediately, cordon, control and refer to control room guide to action.

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Stephen Thomas, of Gunville Road, Newport, were sentenced for playing a part in the mass production of crystal meth on the Isle of Wight.

Those manufacturing it can do it cheaply, they do not have to grow anything and many of the ingredients can be found in a supermarket, which is why it is crucial that police officers know what to look for when discovering a possible meth lab (see boxes).

Sgt Simon Fuller, from South Wales Police, is based at the Welsh Assembly police unit as a police search advisor. As deputy chairman of the South Wales Federation, he

has raised concerns over the health and safety of officers who may come across contaminated meth labs without proper knowledge or equipment.

“The chemicals used in this drug can be incredibly explosive so an officer without any protection does not want to be going anywhere near it. It’s no good going in with rubber gloves and t-shirt, you need to have experts going in protective gear, not Boss suits.”

Sgt Fuller and his colleagues, who work in search are trained by the army in counter terrorist measures, are also involved in other matters

connected to search involving crime scenes.

He says that because crystal meth is easy to make, an ordinary terrace house or flat can be turned into a meth lab and everyday chemicals, such as cold medicines, can be used to make it. Sgt Fuller believes that this is why it is such a potential danger in the UK.

“It’s a big problem in the US and that’s why we need to prevent it from happening here.”

He said that they had dealt with a case where a meth lab had been set up in a caravan in Wales



SOCA ALERT PRODUCT A6K268 – ILLICIT METHAMPHETAMINE LAB

This refers to Alert Product A6K268 issued by the Alerts Branch of the Serious Organised Crime Agency (SOCA). It is based on assessed intelligence, warns of dangers and threats from serious organised criminality and is devised with the aim of bringing about remedial action.

ILLICIT METHAMPHETAMINE LAB

In the event of accidental discovery, action should be taken to ensure all Police personnel/occupants **LEAVE THE SITE IMMEDIATELY** and remain at a safe distance in case of fire, explosion or chemical contamination.

DO NOT use phones/radios until clear of the site.

DO NOT turn on/off any lights or electrical appliances.

DO NOT shut down any ongoing chemical process or remove power source to the premises.

DO NOT touch, open or remove any bottles or containers. Some chemicals involved can be fatal if inhaled and death may occur in seconds.

DO NOT allow persons to re enter the site.

NOW INFORM YOUR FORCE CONTROL ROOM

- DO** where possible make notes of what you have seen and done.
- DO** commence a scene log as soon as practicable.
- DO** keep the premises under observation from a safe location.
- DO** evacuate the immediate area and establish a control cordon.

WARNING
ONLY APPROPRIATELY EQUIPPED PERSONNEL SHOULD ENTER THE SITE TO FACILITATE RESCUE OF CASUALTIES OR INDIVIDUALS FROM THE SITE

INDICATORS OF ILLICIT METHAMPHETAMINE LAB

Smells such as ammonia/bleach, cat urine, strong solvent or burnt rubber.

Chemicals include acids, solvents, iodine, ammonia, packs of cold cure medication, anti-freeze and drain cleaner.

Apparatus including lithium batteries, glass jars, funnels, electric hot plates, red/brown stained coffee filters and chemical containers.

METHAMPHETAMINE USERS

Users may show signs of increased agitation, hyperactivity, irritability, confusion, anxiety, paranoia and aggression.

and officers were sent round with no protective gear or background knowledge of what they were dealing with.

“The chemicals used in this drug can be incredibly explosive so an officer without any protection does not want to be going anywhere near it.”

He said: “One of the problems is that crystal meth has chemicals used in its production which are used in peroxide explosives. There will probably be meth in its raw form and peroxide in its raw form which can kill you and literally blow you to bits if you touch it. My advice would be, if you encounter crystal powders with equipment, you should put a cordon around it. The army and fire brigade could be involved.”

As a drug, crystal meth gives the

user a euphoric high, and lasts much longer than crack cocaine, around 12 hours as opposed to 15 minutes. The side effects are horrendous and users often experience paranoia and a feeling of omnipotence which mixes together to create, as Sgt Fuller puts it, ‘a mad man’ mentality.

The drug can be taken in a variety of ways; smoked or even slipped into a drink, it costs around £20 a hit. When the user experiences a come down, as the drug wears off, they will become extremely low and this means users can become addicted after the first hit. They will also need to take it more and more to reach the same hit level.

Health-wise, the body will stop producing saliva which makes it difficult to digest food, the body builds up digestive acid which gets into the blood and manifests itself as open sores on the skin. Eventually, meth addicts can suffer multiple organ shut down and die.

