

MODULE 3

FLORIDA DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

STUDY GUIDE

HIV/AIDS: 101

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COMMONLY USED DRUG SUBSTANCES

Substance use, abuse and dependence have been closely associated with HIV infection since the beginning of the epidemic. Although injection drug use (IDU) is a direct route of transmission, drinking, smoking, ingesting, or inhaling drugs such as alcohol, crack cocaine, methamphetamine (“meth”) and amyl nitrite (“poppers”) are also associated with increased risk for HIV infection. These substances may increase HIV risk by reducing users’ inhibitions to engage in risky sexual behavior.*

COMMONLY USED SUBSTANCES

Alcohol: Excessive alcohol consumption, notably binge drinking, is associated with multiple adverse health and social consequences and is sometimes linked to other drug use. Alcohol use can be an important risk factor for HIV infection because it’s linked to less frequent use of condoms and to multiple sexual partners.

Crack Cocaine: Crack cocaine’s short-lived high and addictiveness can create a compulsive cycle in which users quickly exhaust their resources and turn to other ways to get the drug, including trading sex for drugs or money, which increases HIV infection risk.

Compared to nonusers, crack cocaine users reported:

- A greater number of recent and lifetime sexual partners
- Infrequent condom use
- Heightened sexual pleasure
- Using more than one substance
- Being less responsive to HIV prevention programs, according to recent studies

Methamphetamine: “Meth” use is associated with increased HIV risk and has become a public health threat in recent years because, like alcohol and other substances, it is linked to high-risk sexual activity with non-steady partners under the influence.

- Meth is highly addictive and can be injected
- It tends to dry out the skin on the penis and mucosal tissues in the anus and the vagina, which may lead to small tears and cuts during sex where the HIV virus can enter the body
- Some gay and bisexual men combine meth with erectile dysfunction drugs that are also associated with unprotected anal sex

The largest numbers of meth users are white males. According to one study, gay and bisexual men report using meth and other stimulants at rates approximately 9 times as high as the general population.

Inhalants: Like meth, use of amyl nitrite (“poppers”) has also been associated with increased HIV risk. Nitrite inhalants have long been linked to risky sexual behaviors, illegal drug use, and sexually transmitted infections among gay and bisexual men. They’ve also recently been linked to increased use among adolescents because inhalants do the following:

- Enhance sexual pleasure.
- Aid anal sex by increasing sensitivity and relaxing the sphincter, which may lead to more unprotected sex.
- Are commonly found, even in household products.

* [Source: HIV and Substance Abuse in the United States, CDC Fact Sheet, March 2013]