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Meth can wreak havoc below the surface as well

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Some of the consequences of methamphetamine are easy to see in the user's teeth, skin and face. But it wreaks even more serious damage beneath the surface.

Dr. Berton Toews, a specialist in addiction medicine at the Wyoming Recovery, and Thomas Willson, a recovering addict, provided these insights on what meth does to the body:

*** Skin** -- The bloody sores and scabs on an addict's skin are self-induced, Toews said. Users may actually think they are picking live bugs from their skin. Picking at the skin also can be nervous habit from days of being wide-awake and overstimulated.

Willson, 38, still bears these scars on his arms. He is also scarred with long marks, from his bicep to his forearm, where he purposefully cut himself with a knife. He wanted to see if he could still feel pain.

*** Teeth** -- A striking mark of many long-time addicts is their teeth. A combination of factors is likely to blame. Skipping meals for days at a time leaves addicts malnourished. They may not go to a dentist or even to brush their teeth. And meth dehydrates the body. The dry mouth and poor hygiene can change the bacteria composition in the mouth, causing the teeth to rot, Toews said. In some cases, addicts will develop advanced cases of gingivitis.

*** Infection** -- Contaminated needles create an obvious risk of infection. Willson, for example, shared homemade needles with fellow prisoners. He feels lucky to have tested negative for both HIV and Hepatitis C.

Hepatitis C, unlike Hepatitis A or B which is treatable in most patients, can sit dormant for years. Then, it progressively damages the liver and can cause serosias of the liver and death.

Even if users don't contract these viruses, there are still the issues of unsafe cooking practices, Toews said. They may be using contaminated water and contract a number of different strep and staph infections.

Willson once contracted a staph infection on his thumb. He ended up cutting it out himself with a knife.

*** Sexually transmitted diseases** -- Meth drastically affects a person's judgment. The user may have indiscriminate, unprotected sex, Toews said.

Also, dehydration decreases natural lubrication. This increases damage to genitalia and makes transmission of STDs between partners easier, Toews said.

For these reasons, smoking meth instead of injecting doesn't protect users from AIDS or other STDs, Toews said.

*** Brain** -- Meth's most serious organ damage is to the brain, Toews said. Long-term use can destroy chemical balances and eventually sever the person's grasp of reality.

Methamphetamine causes the brain to release extra dopamine n the neurotransmitter at the center of the pleasure circuit. For recreational use, this causes the desired "high" people have heard about -- an increase in energy and self esteem. It makes people feel very capable.

Addiction starts as users try to recreate those first big highs. But as the highs become harder and harder to achieve, people may increase their use.

This will eventually upset the chemical balance in the brain. Meth causes the brain to make more dopamine while metabolizing it more slowly. Dopamine sticks around longer, keeping users awake and wired for hours and sometimes days at a time.

The user becomes irritable, paranoid and suspicious. Thinking becomes less organized. Toews says a

student who uses meth to study may indeed stay awake, but he may be reread the same page for 30 minutes.

When the meth runs out, users may sleep for days at a time. When they wake up, they feel OK for a few days, Toews said. But the slightest stimulus -- a song or TV commercial -- can trigger "jonesing." Dopamine production goes into overdrive, causing an intense craving that leads to a binge.

Resetting this chemical balance can take weeks or even months, making it difficult for meth users to stay clean on their own.

Get help:

If you or someone you know has a methamphetamine problem, the worst course of action is to do nothing, Dr. Berton Toews said.

* First, go to a meeting. Call Narcotics Anonymous at 266-7154 for meeting times and information. It will be one of the most important steps you can take, Toews said.

Another good resource is the 12-24 Club, 136 W. Eighth St. It is a place for people who are recovering from addiction.

* Second, call one of Casper's recovery centers, such as Wyoming Behavioral Institute or Wyoming Recovery, to outline options.

* Finally, recognize that it is a chronic illness. Calling today, or next week, will be a good step toward recovery.

"The notion that the addict will not get better until they hit rock bottom is not true. You can help a person in any stage. You can't argue them to get better, but you can start something."