



# Street drugs and HIV

Watch that recreational drug use doesn't cause problems or become a problem of its own

By Dr. Pierre Côté

Drug use has long been associated with HIV because of transmission through injection. Even today, a significant percentage of people with HIV are infected through the use of injection drugs. But non-injection recreational drugs have been recognized as also having important consequences for people living with HIV and programs have been set up by many community groups to try and reduce their negative effects.

Most street drugs are psychotropic, or mind-altering, and have either a sedative (calming), stimulant, **hallucinogenic** or analgesic (pain-killing) effect. They modify your state of consciousness and generally alter judgement. They can also stimulate libido (sex drive).

The effects of any drug will vary according to many factors, including the amount consumed, the user's prior exposure to the drug, how the drug is taken and the circumstances surrounding its use. Your psychological state and mood, your general state (for example whether your stomach is empty or full), simultaneous consumption of alcohol or other substances, and the presence of other people also influence the effects felt when using a drug.

## Alcohol and GHB

Alcohol has a generally euphoric effect. The consequences of alcohol consumption on people living with HIV (apart from a possible loosening of safe sex practices when you're drunk) can include a toxic effect on the liver that makes anti-HIV medications potentially dangerous, particularly for chronic drinkers. It can be very risky to combine alcohol with other drugs, notably gamma-hydroxybutyrate (GHB), because the mixture has a sedative effect that can produce severe and potentially fatal respiratory depression. GHB has a very powerful euphoric effect and overdoses are common. It's important to avoid taking it with other drugs.

## Stimulants: cocaine, speed & meth

Stimulants are substances that heighten brain and body function. They make you feel energetic, all-powerful and self-confident, while suppressing appetite and the need for sleep. They come in different forms and can be taken in a variety of ways. Some are pills that you swallow, others come as powders that can be inhaled or prepared to smoke or inject.

The euphoric effect or high from cocaine is short-lasting, from 30 to 60 minutes. Taken in larger quantities, cocaine can induce hallucinations, anxiety, paranoid symptoms and confusion that can even become delirium.

The euphoric effect of amphetamines (*speed*) can last several hours. As with other stimulants, soon after consuming amphetamines there is an increase in heart rate, blood pressure and body temperature that can lead to heart attack or stroke. Once the high has passed, you're left with a serious down that can last several days and make you very anxious and depressed.

## Recreational use, problem use and addiction

### Recreational use

You drink or use drugs for recreational purposes when there's a special event or moment (party with friends, etc.), often when you're socializing. You like to "party," but just once in a while. You control your drug use, it doesn't harm you, and it's not the most important thing in your life.

### Problem use

Drinking or using drugs becomes a problem as soon as these begin to have a negative impact on your life; if, for example, you need to get drunk every week-end or smoke a joint every night. Another thing to look out for is if you tend to isolate yourself when drinking or using drugs.

### Addiction

At the extreme of problem drug use is dependence. This is a complex phenomenon that includes biological, psychological, and social aspects. Dependence can be psychological, physical or both. When you become dependent on a substance, you lose control of your drug use—it takes control of you. You can no longer get along without taking one or more substances.

*Source: Adapted from Drugs, alcohol and gay men, SÉRO ZÉRO*

By reducing inhibitions, crystal meth can lead people to engage in much riskier sexual behaviour than they might otherwise

Crystal meth is even more powerful than speed, especially when smoked or injected. Its euphoric effect can last up to 24 hours. It produces a significant decrease in appetite and keeps you very wide awake. The effects on the body are similar to those of speed but even more powerful. Consuming large amounts produces serious psychological effects and the "down" following a period of consumption is strong and can last several days.

Crystal meth is a powerful sexual stimulant and people often push their sexual limits while intoxicated. By reducing inhibitions, crystal meth can lead people to engage in much riskier sexual behaviour than they might otherwise.

Larger doses and regular use of stimulants can lead to erectile dysfunction and may lead to more frequent receptive anal intercourse. As well, these substances can dry out mucous membranes, increasing the risk of condom breakage and tears in the mucous membrane, thus increasing the risk of acquiring HIV and other infections.

### Hallucinogens: ecstasy, ketamine, cannabis

Hallucinogens are substances that have a significant effect on sensations, emotions and perceptions of reality. Ecstasy produces a euphoric state

in which you feel very sensual. However, it's common to have some difficulty achieving orgasm. Drinking water regularly is advisable as this drug makes you sweat more than usual and can lead to dehydration. Ketamine ("K") produces a dissociative euphoric feeling that's often described as floating. It's taken by inhaling a powder that comes in a distributor bottle usually called a *bumper*. Cannabis or pot is so widely used that people consider it commonplace. It has little effect on libido and sexual performance. However, it can dry out mucous membranes and therefore increase the risk of transmission of sexually transmitted diseases

### Erectile dysfunction drugs — Viagra™, Levitra®, Cialis®

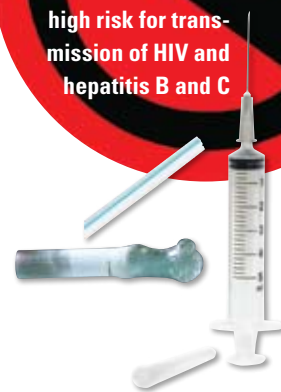
Use of erectile dysfunction drugs is widespread. They're often consumed alongside recreational drugs to counter the erectile difficulties these may produce. The combination of these drugs and amyl nitrate (poppers) can be very dangerous. When taken together, they can reduce blood pressure, which can cause a heart attack.

As well, many anti-HIV medications, such as ritonavir (Norvir®) and Kaletra® can increase concentrations of Viagra, Levitra or Cialis in the blood. In people taking these HIV medications, the PDE5 inhibitors should be taken at very low doses (for example, a half dose no more than

continued on page 12

### Alert!

Sharing the straws, pipes or needles used to consume drugs presents a high risk for transmission of HIV and hepatitis B and C



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## Have you taken risks with someone who's HIV negative?

Treatment to prevent the transmission of HIV is called post-exposure prophylaxis (PEP). Treatment needs to be started as soon as possible after exposure (the maximum delay is 72 hours). PEP involves taking anti-HIV medication for four weeks. For it to work, the HIV-negative person needs to go to an emergency department or specialized clinic as quickly as possible after exposure. Medical personnel will assess the risk and the need for PEP.

# Evaluating your alcohol and drug use

## NO YES

- I sometimes drink or take drugs to escape problems
- Drinking or taking drugs helps me to function
- The people close to me complain that I drink or take drugs too much
- I sometime feel guilty after I drink or take drugs
- I sometimes engage in higher-risk sexual practices when I drink or take drugs
- I sometimes forget to take my anti-HIV medications when I'm drinking or taking drugs
- I drink or take drugs to solve even the most insignificant problem
- I tend to hide my drinking or drug taking
- It takes an effort for me to reduce my drug or alcohol use
- I need to drink or take more drugs than before in order to get the same effect

## Using drugs or alcohol has caused me the following problems:

- physical
- emotional
- social
- family
- financial
- I take drugs or alcohol on an empty stomach, when I get up
- I tend to isolate myself when taking drugs or alcohol
- I sometimes get aggressive after using drugs or alcohol
- I have a hard time abstaining from drugs or alcohol over several days

If, after answering these questions, you feel you need help, contemplate asking for help from your doctor or a community service organization.

Source: Adapted from *Drugs, alcohol and gay men*, SÉRO ZÉRO

continued from page 9

every second day) to avoid serious side effects and toxicities.

## Recreational drugs and anti-HIV medications

Alcohol and drug use can affect anti-HIV treatment in a number of ways. Regular or even occasional use can increase the chance of forgetting doses and thus the risk of increased viral load and/or development of resistance to treatment. These substances can also produce toxicity, especially in the liver.

Blood levels of most recreational drugs are increased by anti-HIV medications, particularly ritonavir-based regimens. The recreational drug's effect can therefore be much more powerful than expected. People taking a therapeutic regimen that includes ritonavir (Norvir®) or Kaletra®, should start by taking ¼ to ½ of the usual dose of a recreational drug.

People living with HIV should discuss their recreational drug use — however minimal — with their doctor or pharmacist, who can provide valuable advice about necessary precautions. Everyone has their own reasons for consuming alcohol or drugs and most will never have problems because of them. But if you feel that your own use is becoming a problem, resources are available to help you. This is another good thing to discuss with your doctor. **R**

## Give the party a happy ending

While it's inadvisable to combine illicit drugs with antiretrovirals (ARVs), here are some suggestions for minimizing problems if you do mix the two:

- Take a smaller dose of the recreational drug if you're taking ARVs, especially if you're not familiar with the substance you're taking.
- See how your body reacts before consuming more.
- Take breaks, stay cool and well hydrated, and urinate frequently.
- Stay with your friends.
- Tell your friends what you've taken (drugs and ARVs).
- Avoid excesses (multiples doses over the night).
- Rest and eat well before and after the night out.
- Do not drive.
- Do not forget safe sex practices.
- If you don't feel well, ask for help.

Source: Adapted from: *Trottier B., le Point de VIH, printemps 2007; Prudemment svp, Campagne de prévention BBCM*

