Meth Overdose Deaths Rise Rapidly Across All Racial, Ethnic Groups

But American Indians and Alaska Natives saw the sharpest increase in deaths involving methamphetamines. Here's a possible solution.

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Overdose deaths related to methamphetamines spiked between 2011 and 2018 among all racial and ethnic groups, with men generally experiencing higher rates of death than women. But the surge was most prominent among American Indians and Alaska Natives. Meth-related deaths among those population groups more than quadrupled during the eight-year period, according to a study by the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA), part of the National Institutes of Health (NIH). The research was published in JAMA Psychiatry.

"Identifying populations that have a higher rate of methamphetamine overdose is a crucial step toward curbing the underlying methamphetamine crisis," said lead investigator Beth Han, MD, PhD, MPH, in an NIH press release. "By focusing on the unique needs of individuals and developing culturally tailored interventions, we can begin to move away from one-size-fits-all approaches and toward more effective, tailored interventions."

Overdoses aren't the only negative health concerns around methamphetamines. The drug, which can be injected and can lead to sexual risk-taking, is also linked to higher rates of HIV and hepatitis C. (For more about that in POZ, see "Meth Use Strongly Tied to New HIV Cases in Gay and Bi Men" and "Meth and HIV Among Gay and Bi Latino Men [VIDEOS]" plus the cover story "Taking the High Road: Facing Addiction and Depression.")

"While much attention is focused on the opioid crisis, a methamphetamine crisis has been quietly, but actively, gaining steam—particularly among American Indians and Alaska Natives, who are disproportionately affected by a number of health conditions," said Nora D. Volkow, MD, a senior author of the study and the director of NIDA. "American Indian and Alaska Native populations experience structural disadvantages but have cultural strengths that can be leveraged to prevent methamphetamine use and improve health outcomes for those living with addiction."

Expanding on the cultural strengths of these communities, the NIH press release states:

> Shared decision-making between patient and health care provider and a holistic approach to wellness are deeply rooted traditions among some American Indian and Alaska Native groups

and exist in the Indian health care system. Traditional practices, such as talking circles, in which all members of a group can provide an uninterrupted perspective, and ceremonies, such as smudging, have been integrated into the health practices of many Tribal communities. Leveraging traditions may offer a unique and culturally resonant way to promote resilience to help prevent drug use among young people. Development and implementation of other culturally appropriate and community-based prevention; targeting youth and families with positive early intervention strategies; and provider and community education may also aid prevention efforts among this population.

The authors also note that American Indians and Alaska Natives often experience other health disparities as well. These are linked to “long-term decreased access to education, high rates of poverty and discrimination in the delivery of health services.”

To gather information on meth-related deaths, the NIH researchers combed through data from the National Vital Statistics System, a nationwide database on births and deaths maintained by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. They narrowed their research to people between 25 and 54 years old, the most common age range for people who use meth.

Did you know that sharing needles and other equipment used to inject drugs is a common route for hep C transmission? To learn more, read the basics on Hepatitis C Transmission and Risks in HepMag.com. Similarly, check out the basics on HIV Transmission and Risks in POZ.com.

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