Does Meth Use Make You Biologically More Vulnerable to HIV?

A $3.9 million grant will help Miami and New York researchers explore this question as they study HIV and meth use among gay and bi men.

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It is well known that methamphetamine use is linked to increased HIV risk and diagnoses, notably among gay and bisexual men. As the crystal meth epidemic shows no signs of receding, a better understanding of this complicated interplay is vital to preventing HIV among this population. To that end, the federal government awarded a $3.9 million grant over two years to university researchers in Miami and New York City.

Two key questions the scientists will explore are:

- Does meth use alter the rectal immune function and increase biological vulnerability to HIV?
- What's the best way to use telehealth to motivate gay and bisexual men who use meth to take advantage of pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP), a pill or injection that prevents HIV?

Use of drugs, including meth, during sex, is 20 times more prevalent among men who have sex with men (MSM) than among heterosexual men, the grant recipients note, adding that a third of new HIV cases among gay and bi men were among those who reported recent meth use.

The grant was awarded by the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID) to research teams at the University of Miami Miller School of Medicine and City University of New York Graduate School of Public Health and Health Policy (CUNY SPH), according to a press release from the Miller School of Medicine. The grant is part of the federal government initiative LITE-2 (Limited Interaction Targeted Epidemiology).

The research team leaders are Adam Carrico, PhD, a professor of public health sciences at the Miller School, and Christian Grov, PhD, MPH, who specializes in sexual health, HIV/AIDS and substance use at CUNY SPH.

Scientists will initially enroll 5,000 men who have sex with men in the studies; if they meet certain

benchmarks along the way, the researchers will become eligible for up to three more years of funding, according to a CUNY press statement.

“We hope that the LITE-2 initiative will guide geographically targeted, comprehensive public health approaches to address meth use as a resurgent driver of the HIV epidemic in sexual minority men,” Carrico said. “It will also yield important insights regarding the effectiveness of motivational enhancement interventions to optimize PrEP use in sexual minority men who use meth.”

“We have known for decades that meth use contributes to behavioral disinhibition, which puts people at greater risk for HIV, but now we will also answer questions related to whether meth use increases biological vulnerability,” added Grov, an investigator at the Institute for Implementation Science in Population Health at CUNY SPH. “This could point us toward the development of novel biomedical interventions targeting rectal immune function.”

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