

focus on



Chemsex

'While it is not possible to say that using drugs causes sexual risk-taking behaviour, it is possible to say that there is an association between the two: men who use a range of drugs during sex are more likely to report engaging in HIV transmission risk behaviours than men who do not'¹



What is Chemsex?

Chemsex is commonly defined as '...intentional sex under the influence of psychoactive drugs, mostly among men who have sex with men (MSM)'.² The drugs most commonly associated with chemsex are Mephedrone (M-Cat), Crystal Methamphetamine (Crystal meth) and Gamma-hydroxybutyrate acid (GHB).

GHB is a fatty acid which naturally occurs in the central nervous system (CNS). Originally developed as an anaesthetic, GHB is known by a variety of street names - 'G', *liquid x / liquid ecstasy, scoop etc.* – and is most commonly consumed as a liquid (but is increasingly become available in powder form). It is often sold in small bottles, roughly the size of hotel shampoo bottles (30ml- 50ml) and is '...rapidly absorbed and metabolised, possessing a plasma half-life of approximately 20 minutes'³.

£200: average cost of 1gm Crystal Meth in UK

Psychotropic doses of GHB are usually between 0.5 – 1.5ml and users report ingesting it by 'caps' (*i.e. drinking from the cap of the bottle*). Because of the small amounts involved, the risks of overdosing on GHB are high, and small incremental dose increases can cause sedation and severely impair memory function, making users vulnerable to sexual assault.

Although medically approved in Europe and the US for the treatment of sleep disorders (e.g. narcolepsy and cataplexy), when used recreationally for long periods, users can develop dependence and often present at services with severe withdrawal symptoms including '...delirium, seizures, and rhabdomyolysis requiring intensive care'.⁴

Drugs associated with chemsex are either consumed immediately preceding and/or during chemsex sessions, often in combination, and/or with alcohol and other substances. M-Cat and Crystal Meth are both stimulant drugs that artificially increase the amount of the naturally

occurring chemical dopamine in the brain, raise the body's blood pressure and increase the heart rate, producing feelings of increased energy and euphoria. GHB is a powerful disinhibitor which acts as a neurotransmitter at two GHB receptor subtypes in the brain. Used in combination, users report these drugs can facilitate sustained sexual arousal and make receptive anal intercourse easier or more pleasurable.

What are the Risks?

Data from a 2014 'Positive Voices' survey of people attending HIV clinics in England and Wales found that '29% of HIV positive MSM engaged in chemsex in the last year'⁵. This report, alongside more recent research, has led to calls for chemsex to become recognised as a public health priority, highlighting the need to stem the escalation of risks such as:



- ✦ The transmission of STIs - in particular HIV – facilitated by the sexual disinhibition and increased risk-taking behaviours of involved parties
- ✦ The transmission of BBVs including HepC and HIV, particularly prevalent amongst the cohort of MSM who engage in 'slamming' - IV use of chemsex drugs such as M-Cat and Crystal Meth. Some studies have shown that '...HIV causes more injury to nerve cells and more cognitive problems in people who use methamphetamine than it does in people who have HIV and don't use (Crystal Meth)'⁶
- ✦ Risk of overdose is more common amongst this group due to the prevalence towards poly-drug use. Mixing GHB with alcohol, for example, can cause unconsciousness, amnesia, coma and in some cases can be fatal

How can ILLY help?

We have developed an integrated substance misuse and sexual health case management system that meets the business and service needs for both, especially statutory reporting requirements to the PHE.

Please see our featured client success story on our website "Innovations in Sexual Health Services".

- ✦ Quickly add clients attending outreach / clinic drop-ins
- ✦ Report to the PHE datasets specific to Sexual Health – SRHAD and GUMCAD
- ✦ Search for multiple clients by 'pending screening results' for efficient updating of STI / BBV results once these have been received from a lab
- ✦ Report across a variety of SH specific fields to satisfy local reporting requirements



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¹ The Chemsex study: Drug use in sexual settings among gay & bisexual men in Lambeth, Southwark & Lewisham - London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine (2014)

² What is chemsex and why does it matter? – *BMJ* (2015)

³ 'Report on the risk assessment of GHB in the framework of the joint action on new synthetic drugs' - *European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction*, (2002)

⁴ Sexualized drug use ('chemsex') and high-risk sexual behaviours in HIV-positive men who have sex with men – *Positive Voices* (2014) -

⁵ 'Possible long-term effects of γ -hydroxybutyric acid (GHB) due to neurotoxicity and overdose' – T.M Brunt et al. (2012)

⁶ 'Additive effects of HIV and chronic methamphetamine use on brain metabolite abnormalities' - Chang L, Ernst T, Speck O, Grob CS. *Am J Psychiatry* (2005)

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