

Methamphetamine (ice) use in the family.

There has been an enormous amount of attention in Australia on methamphetamine (ice) use, much of which has been sensationalised. It is important to break through these negative stereotypes and see the person rather than the drug.

Ice use in Australia

In Australia only a small number of people use ice regularly and only a small proportion of users will experience problems.

Having a family member who uses ice can be a source of stress and worry. It is normal to feel helpless, frustrated and concerned. It is important not to give up hope. Ice is a drug like any other and including your family member rather than excluding them is essential. People can and do give up this drug and you can help your family member by reducing the harms and keeping them safe. There are support services available and while there are no simple answers, the following strategies may help you and your family.

How can I tell if someone is using methamphetamine?

It is difficult to tell with any certainty that someone is using ice. The effects of ice can vary from person to person. Changes in behaviour or moods may indicate use of ice or another substance; however, these changes may also indicate an issue in the person's life that is not drug-related.

Signs that appear to be uncharacteristic of the person may require your attention, regardless of whether drugs are involved. These signs include:

- Mood swings
- Tiredness
- Explosive outbursts
- Minimal interaction with family
- Trouble with the police
- Changes in eating patterns
- Frequent absences from school/work
- Sudden changes of friends
- Unexplained need for money
- Declining school/work performance
- Disappearing money and valuables
- Impaired memory
- Decrease in other activities that may have been important to the person previously
- Poor concentration
- Withdrawing socially.

(Note: these signs may be associated with any substance use)

What is drug dependence?

A person is understood to have developed dependence on a drug when they need to use it regularly in order to feel 'normal', and the craving to use it starts to become more important than other things in their life, such as relationships, family or work.

There are degrees of dependence, ranging from mild dependency to compulsive use (often referred to as addiction). It is impossible to say how long or how often a person must use ice before they become dependent, because this varies from person to person.

It is important to understand that most people who take ice do not become dependent.

Being informed

Gather knowledge about the effects of ice so you can better understand the situation your family may be in. By understanding the effects, you can weigh up the risk to both the person using ice and those around them.

How you can help

Family members are often well placed to help people make safer choices about ice and to contact support services for further help.

If you suspect that a family member is using ice, try to stay calm and think about how you are going to approach them. Calm, respectful and open communication is more helpful for both parties. Verbal or physical confrontation with the person who is using ice will worsen, not help, the situation.

By expressing concern about a particular behaviour, and not directly accusing your family member of ice use, you provide an opportunity to talk about what is happening in their life.

Resist the temptation to search their room for evidence of ice as this is likely to do more harm than good: it will create an environment of suspicion and mistrust.

Problematic use

Identifying if the person you care about is using ice is never easy. It is often a matter of personal perception. Many experts agree that problematic ice use is not measured by how much ice a person uses, but by how it affects the person's life and the lives of those around them.

Share your concerns

Talk to other family members about how they are prepared to be involved in dealing with the person's ice dependence. This conversation can help set expectations and develop a network of support, so family members don't feel isolated and overwhelmed by the situation.

It is also important that the people around the person who uses ice share their knowledge about the situation so that a consistent approach can be adopted.

When everyone is on the same page they are better able to provide support for their loved one.

Choose an appropriate time to talk

If a person is caught at a time when they are unprepared, they may be more inclined to react defensively. Try to remove any distractions, such as mobile devices. Avoid attempting an important discussion while they are under the influence of ice or other substances such as alcohol.

Explain how their behaviour is affecting you

Keep the communication open. One of the most important steps in bringing about change is to acknowledge what is going on and to explain how you feel to the person taking ice.

A person using ice needs to be ready to change before they stop using. Talking to the person may often not bring about instant change, but it's a start.

The following suggestions may help:

- Explain how you feel and how their ice use is affecting you.
- Give concrete examples of their behaviour and how you feel about it.
- Try to remain calm and logical and stick to the point you wish to get across to them.
- Refuse to be drawn into an argument.
- Use 'I' statements instead of 'you' statements.

Listen

If your family member wants to tell you something about their situation, listen carefully without being judgmental.

Allow and encourage the person to speak in full sentences without interruption. After they have finished speaking, repeat back to them what you have heard and understood so they can explain any misunderstandings.

● Try

'I'm really worried about ...'

'I feel ... when you ...'

'I am concerned that ...'

Instead of

'You should ...' or 'You must ...'

'Your problem is ...'

'You'd better ... or else ...'

Ask calm, respectful questions such as:

'What do you like about using ice?'

'What don't you like?'

'Where does that leave you?'

Try not to force the issue. It's okay to leave the questions hanging there.

It is important for the person taking ice to realise how their behaviour is affecting you.

Don't try to solve their problem. It is their problem. Real, long-term change will only occur when the person takes responsibility for their actions and deals with the consequences.

Money matters

Knowing whether to give money to a family member who is using drugs is a complicated issue. You do not want to enable their drug use but you also do not want to see them in debt or resort to illegal means to obtain money from elsewhere.

Whatever you decide will be right for you, as long as you do not give them more than you can afford. It is important to remember not to get into debt to support their drug use, and if you do choose to assist them financially, to do so consciously and without resentment.

Set boundaries

Communicate rules about what is and isn't acceptable behaviour in your home and the consequences for breaking them. Work out your limits, be clear and direct, and stick to what you say. Consequences about breaking boundaries need to be clear and reasonable and should not include ultimatums that you are not prepared to follow through with, such as 'if you continue to use, you will have to leave'.

Find treatment options

There are many treatment and support options available. Different approaches work for different people at different times. Sometimes a person isn't ready to stop using drugs yet, but treatment options that focus on reducing the harms may be helpful.

Trying to force someone into treatment when they don't feel ready is not likely to lead to positive outcomes.

Acknowledge the small changes

It can be hard to stay positive when someone you care about is struggling with the effects of ice and all the issues that using it can cause or aggravate. But try to acknowledge the positive steps made towards dealing with these challenges better by both the person using drugs and yourself.

Managing a bad reaction to ice

Ice use may sometimes lead to aggressive behaviour. If this happens:

Stay calm

- Move slowly and try not to make too much eye contact.
- Give the person space and don't crowd them.
- Keep your voice low, calm and steady.
- Move children away.
- Make the area as safe as you can; remove dangerous objects.
- Don't ask too many questions. Say things like, 'I am not angry with you – I just want to make sure you are safe.'
- Try to use the person's name. For example, 'Jason, can you tell me what is going on for you?'

Reassure

- Be supportive. Tell them that they will be okay, and that what they're feeling will pass when the ice wears off.
- Help them calm down by encouraging them to move to a quiet place where they can rest.
- Listen to them and respond with calming comments. This isn't the time to argue.

Respond

- If you are worried about anyone who has taken ice, call an ambulance by dialing triple zero (000).
- Ambulance officers don't need to involve the police.
- If the person becomes violent or threatens to hurt themselves or someone else, move yourself and others to a safe place and call the police by dialing triple zero (000).

Get support for you and your family

Support for you and your family is very important during this difficult time. It can be particularly hard for you when the person using drugs is not ready to change their behaviour. Even when they do decide to change their behaviour, it can take a long time and there can be many setbacks along the way.

Remember the person using ice is the only person who can change their behaviour. What you can control is how you deal with the situation, so looking after yourself is a really important part of helping the person using ice and helping your family.

Families are impacted in different ways by the use of substances generally. When we talk about drug use in the family, it is important not to forget the possible impacts on children where parents who care for them use substances such as ice. While the use of ice alone is not sufficient to trigger child protection concerns, it may be a contributing cause of neglect, harm or another form of abuse to a child, which may require involvement from Child Protection.

It is important to take care of yourself – there is no need to deal with drug issues alone. You could consider:

- **Talking with a friend:** It may help to discuss the problem with a friend. Talking about how you feel may help clarify your thoughts and work out what you're going to do. It may just help to get things off your chest. It is easier to talk with someone you trust and are comfortable with. They may already be aware that something is wrong. They may have been in a similar situation themselves. People are usually very willing to help a friend, but they often have to be asked.
- **Talking with a professional:** Talking with someone outside your daily life, such as a professional counsellor, can be a useful option. They have talked with many people in similar situations, and can help you to explore ways to deal with the problem. You will find professionals experienced in dealing with drug problems at your local community health centre or at an alcohol and drug treatment agency.
- **Joining a self-help group:** Some people join self-help or support groups to share their thoughts and experiences with other people who are facing, or have faced, similar problems. There are several types of self-help groups for family and friends and each can have a different style. You might want to go to several different meetings before you settle on one that is right for you.

Other help, support services and resources

If there are concerns about the health or emotional safety of children within the home, check the Child Protection number for your area here: www.dhs.vic.gov.au/for-individuals/children,-families-and-young-people/child-protection/child-protection-contacts

After hours Child Protection Emergency Service • 13 12 78

(5.00pm–9.00am Monday–Friday, 24 hours on weekends and public holidays)

Kids Helpline • 1800 55 1800

Where children are old enough to recognise they would like assistance, or to talk to someone, the Kids Helpline is Australia’s only free, private and confidential phone counselling service specifically for young people aged between 5 and 25.

Victorian AIDS Council • vac.org.au/lgbti-health/alcohol-and-other-drug-services-aod

Links to further help and support • adf.org.au/help-support/

Information on methamphetamine • adf.org.au/drug-facts/ice/

For information on treatment

There are a range of treatment services available to support the recovery from alcohol and drug misuse. To find out more information about treatment services in your area, contact the alcohol and drug intake and assessment service.

ACSO • 1300 022 760

(9am–5pm Monday–Friday)

DirectLine is also available to provide free and confidential information, counselling and referral for alcohol and drug issues 24 hours a day 7 days a week.

DirectLine • 1800 888 236 • www.directline.org.au

● Further information

DirectLine • 1800 888 236

Help and support lines (24 hours, 7 days a week)

Ice Advice Line • 1800 423 238

Help and support lines (24 hours, 7 days a week)

Family Drug Help • 1300 660 068 • www.familydrughelp.com.au (Victorian-based)

Services are available to support those around you who may be affected by your drug use. As well as providing understanding, they can provide information about how best to help during treatment.

Family Drug Support • 1300 368 186 • www.fds.org.au (Australia-wide)



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