

Reductions in crystal methamphetamine and gamma-hydroxybutyrate use coincide with changes in sexual behaviour during COVID-19 physical distancing among gay and bisexual men in Australia

Authors:

Hammoud MA¹, Storer D¹, Holt M², Degenhardt L³, Jin F¹, Maher L¹, Bourne A⁴, Lea T², Bavinton B¹, Murphy D¹, Prestage G¹.

¹ Kirby Institute, UNSW Sydney, ² Centre for Social Research in Health, UNSW Sydney, ³ National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, UNSW Sydney, ⁴ Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University Melbourne.

Background:

Gay and bisexual men (GBM) often use crystal methamphetamine (MA) and gamma-hydroxybutyrate (GHB) to enhance sexual pleasure ('chemsex'). Physical distancing measures due to COVID-19 will likely affect GBM's drug use and sexual behaviours. We investigated factors associated with, and reasons ascribed to, GBM's drug use during COVID-19 restrictions.

Methods:

In April 2020, 956 participants in an ongoing online cohort study responded to questions about the impacts of COVID-19 before and during physical distancing measures. Multivariable logistic regression was used to measure associations with drug use during COVID-19 restrictions.

Results:

Mean age was 43.6 years (SD: 13.5), 7.4% HIV-positive. In 2019, 11.4% and 8.1% reported use of MA and GHB respectively. Following the introduction of COVID-19 restrictions, use of MA had reduced to 5.1% representing a 55.3% ($p < 0.001$) reduction and use of GHB reduced to 4.3% representing a 46.9% ($p < 0.001$) reduction.

Cessation of both MA and GHB was associated with reduced chemsex (aOR 0.06; 95%CI 0.01-0.59; $p = 0.016$) and group sex (aOR 0.06; 95%CI 0.01-0.28; $p < 0.001$). Among men who reduced their MA or GHB use, 56.5% indicated that the reason for their reduction was they 'haven't been partying', and they 'have been avoiding people due to social distancing'.

Conclusion:

Reductions in drug use during COVID-19 correspond with simultaneous reductions in chemsex and group sex. As COVID-19 restrictions change in response to jurisdictional epidemiology, prevalence of chemsex among GBM is also likely to increase, particularly among GBM who reported chemsex prior to restrictions. Messaging specifically targeting GBM for sexual health and drug harm reduction should be timed appropriately to anticipate likely increases in sex and drug use as jurisdictional restrictions ease.

Disclosure of Interest Statement:

The Kirby Institute, the Centre for Social Research in Health, the National Drug and Alcohol Research Centre, and the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society are funded by the Australian Government Department of Health. This study received funds funding from the Australian Research Council and the NSW Ministry of Health. In 2018, Flux was partly funded by the Gilead Australia Fellowship Research Grants Program. Funders had no input in the data collection, analysis, interpretation, or presentation of any findings.