

Chemsex & HIV



FAST FACTS

- Chemsex involves using drugs to enhance sex, often by increasing desire and reducing inhibitions.
- The three main drugs used for chemsex are GHB, mephedrone and crystal meth. Each has very different mental and physical effects.
- Chemsex can be dangerous and involves serious risks for your sexual health, but you can take precautions to make it safer and to protect yourself from HIV.
- If you've had chemsex and are worried you've put yourself at risk of HIV infection, get advice from a medical professional as soon as you can.

Chemsex is sometimes called chemfun, party and play or PNP. Using drugs for chemsex is different to drinking alcohol or taking drugs recreationally.

Here we look at the risks involved in chemsex and why it increases your chances of [HIV infection](#).

What is chemsex?

Chemsex involves using drugs to enhance sex. Usually people do it to change the physical sensations they have during sex (increasing pleasure and their ability to have sex for longer), or to change their psychological experiences (increasing their confidence or removing inhibitions). Chemsex can last for many hours at a time and often with multiple sexual partners (for example at parties) but can also just involve a couple or lone masturbation. It is most common among gay men, but straight people often use drugs and alcohol to enhance sex too and there can be sexual health (and other) risks for them as well.

Which drugs are used for chemsex?

The three most popular drugs used during chemsex are:

- gammahydroxybutyrate/gammabutyrolactone (also known as GHB/GBL, G or Gina)
- mephedrone (meph or meow)
- crystal methamphetamine (crystal meth)

They are taken on their own or together with alcohol or other drugs (such as cocaine or ecstasy).

KNOW YOUR CHEMSEX SUBSTANCES...

STAY SAFE WHEN TAKING
GHB, METH OR
CRYSTAL METH



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GHB

LOOKS LIKE...



FEELS LIKE...

- ✓ YOU'RE RELAXED
- ✓ YOU'RE WARM
- ✓ YOU'RE AROUSED

BE AWARE THAT...

- Dosage is difficult - it's a fine line between fun and feeling foggy
- The wrong dosage can result in loss of consciousness and an increased vulnerability to sexual assault

BE CAREFUL TO...

- Avoid mixing with depressants like alcohol or ketamine
- Use a pipette to measure your dosage carefully
- Mix with a non-alcoholic drink and never drink straight from the bottle
- Make sure a friend is around in case you fall unconscious

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Source: Pavilions 'Chemsex drugs'

MEPH

LOOKS LIKE...



FEELS LIKE...

- ✓ YOU'RE CONFIDENT
- ✓ YOU'RE AROUSED
- ✓ YOU'RE CLOSE TO THOSE AROUND YOU

BE AWARE THAT...

- Tolerance can build quickly with Meph - people often feel like they need to take more to generate the same effects
- Injecting is more addictive than snorting and may cause long term dependency

BE CAREFUL TO...

- Drink plenty of water
- Always use clean needles or snorting equipment
- Avoid using if you have a history of heart problems or high blood pressure

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Source: Pavilions 'Chemsex drugs'

CRYSTAL METH

LOOKS LIKE...



FEELS LIKE...

- ✓ YOU'RE WIDE AWAKE
- ✓ YOU'RE IMPULSIVE
- ✓ YOU'RE AROUSED

BE AWARE THAT...

- Crystal Meth interacts poorly with some HIV medicines and anti-depressants, and when they are mixed it can result in heart attacks or strokes
- It's easy to forget to sleep or eat when using which can leave you feeling exhausted and paranoid

BE CAREFUL TO...

- Avoid using if you are taking HIV medication (ARVs) or anti-depressants
- Take regular breaks between use
- Always use clean needles if snorting
- Dispose of injecting equipment safely

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Source: Pavilions 'Chemsex drugs'

If you feel unwell or are worried about your health or safety you should seek advice from your nearest healthcare provider immediately.



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What are the risks of chemsex?

Chemsex drugs change how you feel and behave. When you mix them with sex you increase your risk of HIV and [sexually transmitted infections \(STIs\)](#) in a number of ways.






- With fewer physical inhibitions you're less likely to use [condoms](#), even if you intended to beforehand.
- You may not remember what you've done and whether you used condoms.
- During a long session you might forget to take your [pre-exposure prophylaxis \(PrEP\)](#) medication, making you more vulnerable to HIV if you're not using condoms.
- If you're living with HIV, you might forget to take your [HIV medication](#), which helps keeps you undetectable and prevents you from passing HIV onto your partners.
- You may have sex with strangers (such as people you've hooked up with through social media or the internet) and you may have sex with multiple partners. This increases your chances of exposure to HIV and other STIs.
- You may have more forceful sex than usual, because of the anaesthetic effects of drugs like GHB. The thin lining of the anus is easily damaged or torn during unlubricated anal sex, increasing the risk of HIV infection and other STIs, including [hepatitis C](#).
- If you have a particularly long sex session you may not think about accessing [emergency post-exposure prophylaxis treatment \(PEP\)](#) to prevent HIV transmission until it is too late. PEP only works if it is taken within 72 hours of infection.
- You may inject mephedrone or crystal meth with [shared needles](#) (otherwise known as slamming), increasing your risk of both HIV and hepatitis C infection.

The drugs used in chemsex also have other health risks. It is easy to take too much GHB. This can cause you to 'pass out', leaving you more vulnerable to sexual assault. Whatever the circumstances, and whatever drugs you have taken, remember that sexual assault is never acceptable and is never your fault.

Chemsex drugs change how you feel, sometimes in unwanted ways. They can make you confused, paranoid or frightened and in some cases you can lose touch with reality and have very convincing hallucinations.

It is also common for people to have a 'comedown' after a chemsex session where they feel depressed or low. Certain anti-HIV drugs have been known to interact badly with chemsex drugs. In particular there have been cases of deaths resulting from interactions between ritonavir and crystal meth.

SAFER WAYS TO PARTY AND PLAY...

PACK SOME PROTECTION Always carry condoms and plenty of lube! 	KNOW YOUR HIV STATUS Keep yourself and others healthy 	PARTY WITH PEOPLE YOU TRUST Remember to look out for each other! 
SET YOUR LIMITS Be clear about what kinds of sex you're into 	STAY AWARE ...of what drugs you've taken 	SET REMINDERS ...so you don't forget to take your PrEP or ARVs 

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How can I reduce the risks of chemsex?

Some people enjoy exploring their sexuality through chemsex but taking these drugs is never completely safe. Don't ever let anyone pressure you into taking anything that you don't want to.

If you do plan on participating in chemsex follow these tips to reduce the risks for you and the people you party with.

- Pack some protection – make sure you have lots of condoms and lube to hand. You could also consider pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) to protect you from HIV.
- Know your status – most HIV transmissions happen among people who have recently caught HIV and don't yet know that they are positive. Regular testing to check your status and to screen for other STIs will help to keep you and others healthy.
- Party with people you trust – plan in advance how you will look out for each other and be sure to tell someone where you are going if you leave with someone you don't know.
- Set your limits – before you get high, decide what you are prepared to do sexually and talk about which methods of protection you want to use.
- Stay aware – keep tabs on what drugs you've consumed and be aware when to stop. Don't share needles or syringes and never let someone else inject you.
- Set reminders – if you're taking PrEP to prevent HIV or need to take anti-HIV medication because you are living with HIV, use an alarm to make sure you take your pills at the right time.
- Don't play too long or too often – the longer you party the more likely you are to experience bad side effects like hallucinations. Also, the more often you have chemsex the more likely you are to become dependent on drugs and feel low or depressed when you stop taking them.

What support is available?

If you've had chemsex and are worried that you may have put yourself at risk of HIV, you should

Speak to a sexual health professional or visit an accident and emergency department as soon as possible for advice.

You will probably be offered PEP as a form of emergency treatment if you've contacted them within 72 hours of suspected HIV exposure. At a clinic you will also be offered tests for sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV.

Your healthcare provider can help if you are concerned about addiction or other effects that chemsex drugs are having on your physical or mental wellbeing. You could also get in touch with specialist drug and alcohol counselling services for non-judgemental support, advice and information. Many sexual health clinics have staff that are familiar with chemsex and can offer support.

If you're finding it difficult to find a healthcare advisor in your area, check out this [interactive online tool](#) in multiple languages, for more advice on how to stay safe and make manageable lifestyle changes.

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Last full review:

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Next full review:

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Sources:

NAM (2015) 'Interactions between HIV treatment and recreational drugs'

Let's Talk about It 'Chemsex Support'

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