

People seeking treatment for methamphetamine use are getting older, and treatment services need to adapt

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Introduction: The harms associated with meth/amphetamine use increase over time due to cumulative toxicity, and have significant overlap with age-related health conditions. Understanding changing demographics of people who use meth/amphetamine and access treatment is imperative to ensure treatment settings meet the holistic needs of this population.

Methods: This study analyses data collected through the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare's Alcohol and Other Drug Treatment Services National Minimum Data Set. We extracted data regarding demographics and treatment utilisation of people who indicated meth/amphetamine as their primary drug of concern from 2003-04 (first data available) to 2023-24.

Results: We included data from 697,280 people who accessed treatment, 35% (n=245,782) of whom were female. People aged 20-29 years were the largest group accessing treatment in 2003-04 (n=6,835, 48%), however this has shifted and in 2023-24 people aged 30-39 make up the largest group seeking treatment for meth/amphetamine (n=258,063, 39%). Most notably, the proportion of people aged 50-59 has apparently increased by a factor of 15 (from 64 to 4313), and those aged 60+ by a factor of 11 (from 11 to 609), over the last 20 years.

Discussions and Conclusions: These results describe an aging population of people seeking treatment for meth/amphetamine. While findings follow trends in other substances meth/amphetamine use has specific age and drug related comorbidities, as both duration of meth/amphetamine use and age increase the risk of cardiovascular and cerebrovascular events. This is important given the increase in people aged 50+ seeking treatment. Services need to adapt to provide specialist care for older people who use meth/amphetamine.

Implications for Practice or Policy: More research is needed for interventions to support older people, specific treatment guidelines for managing stimulant use and age-related comorbidities, and health promotion for older people's stimulant use treatment, particularly those aged 50 and over, is required.

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