

Tooth or Dare

Dentist offers special perspective on damage done by crystal meth.

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Dr. Doug Bing is seeing a disturbing change in his practice.

Teeth are falling apart, but the trend has nothing to do with sugary snacks or a failure to floss.

It's crystal meth.

The long-time Pitt Meadows dentist felt compelled to share a set of X-rays with the TIMES to show the kind of destruction the drug is doing to the bodies of users. If this is what the drug is doing to people's teeth, he says, imagine what it is doing to the rest of the body.

The X-rays are a shocking sight. Two sets from the same patient taken six years apart. The first set is pre-meth use, the second post.

The first X-ray captures a healthy set of 18-year-old teeth. The second set depicts a mess of decaying, black, crumbling teeth.

In the last two months alone, Dr. Bing has seen three cases of devastating tooth decay in patients as a result of meth use.

"It's a trickle in," he said. "Because decay is a slow process and it takes a while for it to become visible...we are just starting to see the effects on people's teeth." And Dr. Bing is concerned.

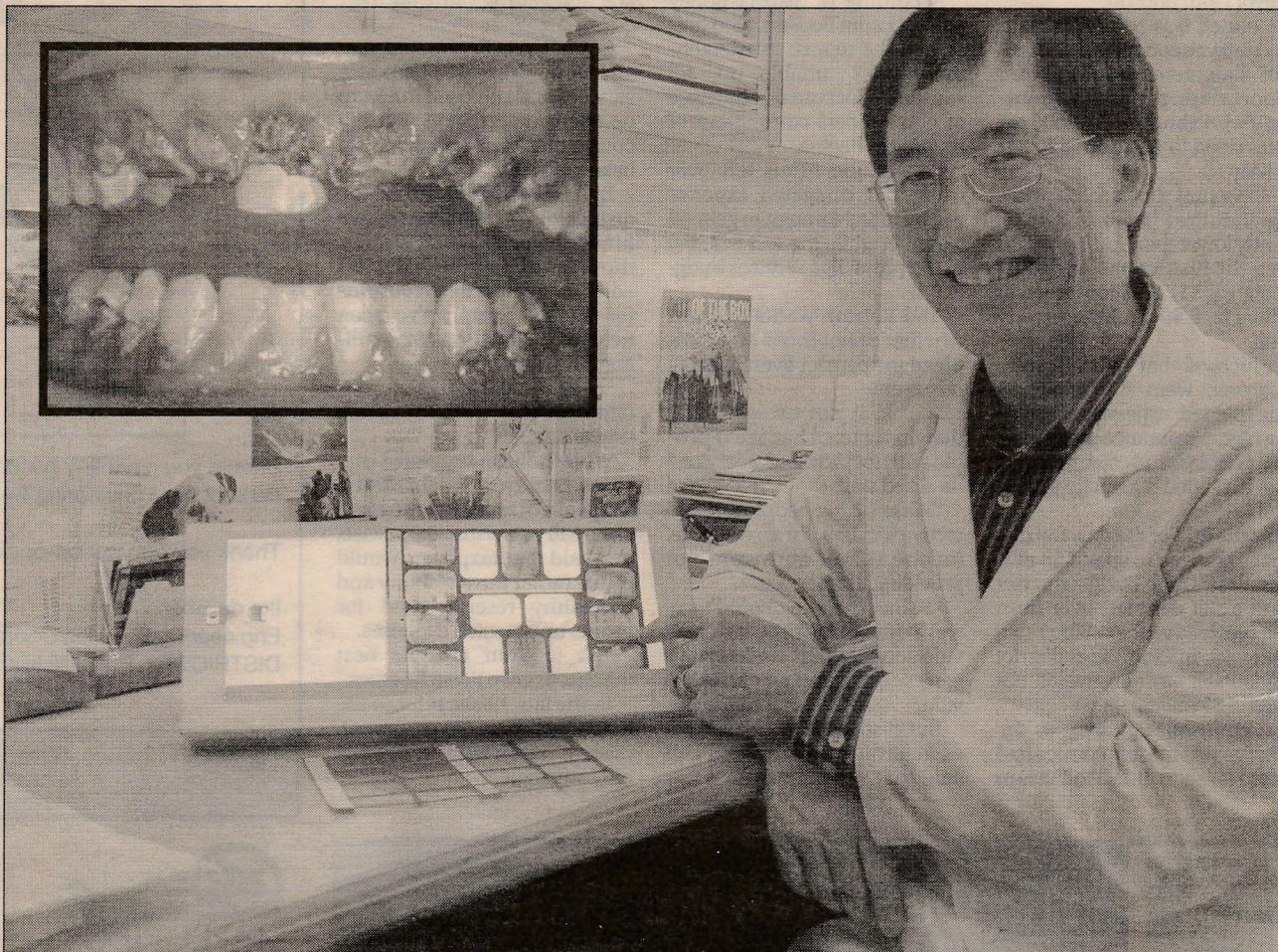
"The social costs down the road are going to be huge," he said. Most people who use crystal meth are in their 20s or early 30s — "we don't really know what the impact will be as they age," Dr. Bing added.

According to the Journal of the Canadian Dental Association, there are a number of reasons meth destroys healthy teeth.

The drug leaves an acidic residue on teeth, oral hygiene in addicts is usually poor, and the drug dulls pain and addicts may not seek dental care. Then there is the drug's tendency to increase motor activity such as excessive chewing, tooth grinding and clenching, which all contribute to the deterioration.

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(Above) Dr. Doug Bing shows before-and-after X-rays (below) of teeth after six years of crystal meth use. (Inset) Meth damage.

Another symptom of meth use is hyposalivation, a decrease in saliva flow. Saliva, however, acts as a natural protector and without it there is an increased risk of decay and demineralization.

Add to this dehydration related to elevated metabolism and meth users tend to be incredibly thirsty. "Then they drink sugary soda pop to quench their thirst which only adds to the problem," said Dr. Bing.

"The effect on teeth is similar to what we see in young children who have been put to sleep with a bottle of juice," added Dr. Bing.

"We have never seen anything like this in young adults, though."

Once the deterioration

begins, if not caught quickly, there is usually little that can be done to save the teeth. "We are going to see more and more people in their 30s with dentures," said Dr. Bing. "This is highly unusual."

Then there are the other impacts on a user's health. Dr. Bing says problems tend to start with minor infections that usually clear up.

Over time, however, as the deterioration advances, chronic inflammation will result. Recent studies indicate gum disease can lead to heart disease later on in life. There have also been links between gum disease and diabetes.

There is no safe way of ingesting the drug. Whether it is smoked, snorted, injected, or taken orally, the impact on healthy teeth is the same.

Unfortunately for parents, there aren't any early warning signs with teeth that would be easy for them to identify.

