

The problem no one speaks about

Friday, 29 June 2012 Soma Norodom

My friends and I went to dinner one night, and I experienced more than just eating a good meal. I'm talking about being high, or "happy", which is a term tourists use when marijuana is added as an ingredient in food, like "happy pizza sprinkled with herb".

It wasn't pizza that I ate, but a meal mixed with herb, which I didn't ask for, and I felt this tingling feeling rush throughout my body, especially around my upper lip and nose. My friends told me I was high and, yes, I was.

Cambodians have been using cannabis (marijuana) in many traditional Khmer foods, especially in soups. The country has earned a reputation for the availability and affordability of marijuana.

But the problem isn't marijuana. It is imported drugs such as methamphetamines, or a pill form of amphetamine called 'ya ma', that are threats to Cambodian youth.

In recent years, drug use has increased due to the availability of methamphetamines. The users, primarily urban school students, take meth on a regular basis because they say it's cool, they want to experience a rush of pleasure and it helps them stay awake so they can focus on schoolwork.

The Cambodian elite, or middle-class teens, purchase meth, rent rooms in guest houses and hotels, have a party, and the addiction starts. Sometimes they spend \$1,000 to \$2,000 a month on the drug. In the US, that's considered "chump change", but for many locals here, it's a year's salary.

The increase in theft has been correlated to drug use, as many users steal in order to feed their addictions. This is a taboo issue because nobody talks about it, but you know it is happening.

Methamphetamine abuse changes the brain chemistry, destroying the tissue in the brain's pleasure centres. As a result, the user is unable to experience any pleasure at all.

Abuse of meth can lead to psychotic behaviour such as paranoia, insomnia, anxiety, violence, delusions, hallucinations and even death.

If you know a friend or a family member who may be addicted to drugs, please get assistance for a drug intervention. Several organisations in Cambodia are helping to combat drug addiction.

The [United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime](#) (UNODC) is working with the government and organisations to implement the (CBTx) Community Based Drug Treatment Program.

The CBTx program is being implemented in Banteay Meanchey province and includes training for health staff in identifying drug-related problems with patients, more knowledge in basic counselling and drug treatment options and supports community outreach workers to educate people who use drugs.

[Friends-International](#) is working in Phnom Penh and Siem Reap and focuses on a drug program aimed at children and youth including prevention, harm reduction, detoxification and rehabilitation. This project is now being replicated within partner organisations.

Korsang targets injecting drug users and ya ma users, who are at serious risk of HIV and other health-related hazards that accompany drug use and high-risk sexual behaviour.

Every year, June 26 is [International Day Against Drug Abuse and Illicit Trafficking](#), but it shouldn't have to take this global observance to raise awareness of a dangerous issue in Cambodia. Most important, we need to spend more time helping the addicted, instead of imprisoning them.

The Social Agenda with Soma Norodom

The views expressed above are solely the author's and do not reflect any positions taken by The Phnom Penh Post.

<http://www.phnompenhpost.com/index.php/2012062957105/National-news/the-problem-no-one-speaks-about.html>