

# Cold Meds: A Rural Drug Epidemic?

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**(CBS)** There's a drug epidemic in the country's heartland, and the raw ingredient fueling it isn't poppies from Afghanistan, or coca from Colombia.

It's cold medicine from the corner store.

The ingredient is called pseudoephedrine and it's found in dozens of over-the-counter cold medicines. It's being used to make methamphetamine, a drug considered as addictive as heroin or crack cocaine at a fraction of the price.

**60 Minutes Wednesday** goes to Missouri, a state with the dubious distinction of being No. 1 in meth labs. As **Correspondent Vicki Mabrey** reports, it's where America's war on drugs has become a war on one drug alone.

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It's 9 p.m. in Franklin County, Mo. Det. Cpl. Jake Grellner and his narcotics squad are tracking two suspects thought to be hiding in a house.

The two suspects have served time in the past for making methamphetamine. The raid recovers a small amount of suspected meth – paraphernalia -- and hundreds of pills, believed to be cold medicine containing pseudoephedrine.

"This is just another day at the office for us, I'm afraid," says Grellner.

The suspects can't be charged until the materials are analyzed in a lab, but they're sent back to prison for violating parole on their prior meth convictions.

How big a problem is meth in Missouri?

"Huge. Every narcotics officer, every department, every police department that I know of is dealing in some way, shape or form with methamphetamine," says Grellner.

"There's no time to do marijuana. There's no time to do cocaine, heroin, all those other drugs. Methamphetamine is so prevalent. One of the local police chiefs said in a recent interview that you're more likely to find methamphetamine in someone's pocket than chewing gum."

About 80 percent of methamphetamine is mass-produced in so-called superlabs in California and Mexico. But it has become so easy to make that small do-it-yourself labs are popping up by the thousands. That's because, as Grellner showed **60 Minutes Wednesday**, the main ingredients used in meth are available almost everywhere.

What do you need to manufacture meth?

"You have to start with cold tablets. You can't start anywhere else. You start out with your cold tablets, and then what you're gonna need is a coffee grinder or a spice grinder and grind that up into a fine powder. Then you start mixing in some of the chemical solvents like acetone, or Heet, which is methanol, Coleman fuel,

something along those lines. Maybe even isopropyl alcohol," says Grellner.

"You're not seeing them wearing white lab coats, and there's not some guy looking over their shoulder making sure that their purification level is OK."

Grellner says you can put an entire meth lab into "a 48-quart cooler or a tote, a truck box on the back of a pickup truck and just haul it around with you."

"That's the thing about meth labs, is this is the first time in the country's history that you have the ability to feed your own addiction," says Grellner. "You can manufacture what you need."

It's called "cooking," and once you start cooking meth — and smoking, snorting, injecting or eating it — the craving for it grows. It floods the brain with the pleasure-inducing hormone dopamine, causing a high that lasts up to 12 hours, and often leading to violent behavior. And when you crash, you crave more.

"Methamphetamine suddenly becomes this thing in their life that they can't do without," says Grellner. "They can do without the hamster and the dog and the cat and the kids and the wife and the cars and the house and the job. But they can't do without meth, and they live each day to get enough stuff, to manufacture the next batch, so they can get high again. ... It's that addictive, that bad."

Selena McDowell, 31, was married with three children when she got hooked on meth. Within five years, she'd lost her job, her husband and her home.

"I lost everything. In a blink of an eye, it was gone," says McDowell. "And I don't even know how I did it."

McDowell and the kids were living in the car when they moved in with a man who knew how to make the drug himself. "After that, it was uncontrollable. I couldn't control it; there was nobody that could control it," she says. "And I tried. No matter how hard I tried to control it, it wasn't gonna happen."

At home, she was surrounded by containers of flammable ether, ammonia, starter fluid and thousands of cold pills, cooking meth every day. In 2002, she was arrested, and her children were taken away.

"You were mixing these incredibly dangerous chemicals at home, with three children," says Mabrey. "They were breathing those fumes."

"They were upstairs," says McDowell. "They weren't around the fumes."

"But you were still endangering your children," says Mabrey.

"Well, yeah. One move with that tank could have blown up my whole house and me and my children sky high," says McDowell.

In 2003, Missouri had more meth labs than any state in America, so the legislature passed a law to limit the amount of pseudoephedrine cold tablets consumers can buy at one time.

But there are still so many people buying so many pills that officers like Sgt. Tom Murley, of the St. Louis County Police Department, are actually assigned to watch people shop.

"What they're doing is, they're going to the different stores and they're buying the legal amount of pills," says Murley, who is following a pill shopper. "But they're circumventing the law by going to store to store to store."

The suspect is later arrested, but police say many of the pill shoppers who get away are headed into the rural areas nearby. That's where Sgt. Tommy Wright and his task force take over. They set a national record by

busting 313 mom-and-pop labs last year.

"If they see us at all coming, they're just gonna run," says Wright, who's on the trail of about 4,000 pseudoephedrine pills stolen from a local Walgreens. His team is acting on a tip. "I can smell it. I can smell it! Get your masks on! Vent it!"

Wright's men find a suspected meth lab in the house; combustible chemicals are everywhere. There's also a bag of powder. They think it's ground-up cold tablets, possibly some of the stolen Walgreens batch.

How dangerous is Wright's job?

"It's extremely dangerous. I mean, just due to the sheer unpredictability of these people," says Wright. "We've had incidents where we've surrounded a house, and they barricade the doors and set the house on fire. With themselves and their families in it."

What would make his job easier? "Ultimately, if we could start limiting pseudoephedrine a little more," says Wright. "You know, you take that ingredient out, make it more difficult to get, much like Oklahoma's done, and our job is cut in half."

Last April, Oklahoma passed the nation's toughest law regulating the sale of pseudoephedrine cold pills. But it took the deaths of three state troopers to make it happen.

Linda Green's husband, Trooper Nik Green, was the third officer killed. Fourteen months ago, he went to investigate a suspicious car by the roadside. "The man had a weapon, which is common," says Green. "He overpowered my husband in the struggle and shot him twice in the head."

With Green lobbying hard, the Oklahoma legislature reclassified pseudoephedrine as what the DEA calls "Schedule 5." That means tablets are only available from pharmacists. Buyers have to show ID, sign a register, and soon, will be monitored in a statewide database.

"If I ever had any way that I felt like I could possibly help to protect the next wife of a law enforcement officer or their children, I felt like this was it," says Green.

Since the law passed, Oklahoma says meth lab seizures are down about 60 percent. And that has inspired Grellner to help write a similar bill for Missouri.

"Who wants to be No. 1? Because if you don't pass this legislation, you're going to be No. 1," says Grellner. "After this year, it'll be up for grabs. Who wants it, 'cause we don't want it anymore."

So when Grellner isn't enforcing the law, he's lobbying to change it. And he says the whole country should follow suit.

Now, 37 other states, and the federal government, are considering tougher laws to regulate pseudoephedrine.

"We've got people driving as far away as Chicago and Indiana to buy cold tablets and bring them back into Missouri right now," says Grellner. "And that problem is only gonna get worse for those states if we go to Schedule Five and they don't."

Some retailers are voluntarily taking tablets off the shelves, and Pfizer, which makes Sudafed, just announced a new formula that can't be used to make meth. But it'll continue to manufacture the old formula, too.

Some drug company lobbyists support limiting sales of pseudoephedrine, but they oppose Schedule Five legislation, which they argue would make it too hard for legitimate consumers to buy cold medicine.

"You're gonna go see the pharmacist and you're gonna show identification, and you're gonna sign a log, and you're gonna get your Sudafed," says Grellner.

"That's inconvenient," says Mabrey. "I wanna run in the store. I wanna get my cold medicine and I wanna go home and get back in bed."

"Right. And if I let you do that, your neighbor's house blows up and kills your children and burns down your house. Which is more inconvenient," asks Grellner.

He adds that the law he wants to pass won't inconvenience people who really have colds: "Under the Missouri state legislation that we're proposing, each man, woman and child in the state of Missouri will be able to buy, throughout the year, 36 boxes of cold tablets. You're gonna be able to get three a month. When's the last time you bought 36 boxes of cold tablets in one year? Meth addicts do. Meth lab people do. They'll buy 36 boxes a day!"

Back at the suspected meth lab in Jefferson County, an informant tells Sgt. Wright there may be thousands more cold tablets in a nearby motel.

That's exactly what they find along with a suspect who admits stealing the whole batch of 4,000 pills from Walgreens.

In less than one day, Wright has confiscated enough cold pills to make about \$40,000 in finished methamphetamine. But just hours after he puts his last suspect in jail, his first suspects of the day are already getting out. By law, they can be held for only 20 hours. Building a case against them will take months.

With rehab and counseling, Selena McDowell says she's winning her fight to stay clean. She has two of her three kids back, and a job as a nurse's aide. But she knows the lure of methamphetamine is never more than a day away.

What does she think about regulating the sale of pseudoephedrine? "I think it will be harder for people to get it," says McDowell. "But they'll still get it."

"They're going to find a way around this, aren't they," Mabrey asks Grellner.

"No, it's a recipe," says Grellner. "Can you make chocolate chip cookies without chocolate chips? You can't make methamphetamine without pseudoephedrine hydrochloride. And if it ends up that three days from now, they start using marshmallows to make meth, then I guess we'll have to do something about marshmallows."

And what's Grellner going to do when all of these meth labs are closed? "I think I'll take a vacation," he says.

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