TEXAS WORKERS' COMPENSATION COMMISSION

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# Methamphetamine Hazards for Hotel/Motel/Apartment Workers and Rental Property Owners

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## Methamphetamine Production and Processing Dangers

There are many dangers associated with the production and processing of synthetic and illegal drugs. The danger is not only to law enforcement agents, but also to workers who may come in contact with the production sites or labs. Workers at most risk include hotel, motel, and apartment employees and rental property owners, who may encounter a Clandestine Lab or methamphetamine lab. The main risk associated with these laboratories is the hazardous chemicals used to make illegal drugs, such as methamphetamine.

Methamphetamine (Meth, an illegal substance also known as "meth," "speed," "crank," "crystal," and "ice"), is a potent synthetic drug that is a stimulant of the central nervous system. The effects of meth are similar to those of cocaine. It gives the user a "rush" or intense feeling of pleasure that lasts longer than cocaine. Meth is an increasingly popular drug that can be injected, snorted, taken orally, or smoked. Long-term use leads to physical dependence. Meth may give a person a feeling of high energy, increased physical activity, talkativeness, alertness, enhanced self-confidence, and extreme elation. Many chronic meth users also experience withdrawals through severe depression, delusions, hallucinations, paranoia, and violent behavior. For this reason, you should never enter an active meth lab. Contact your local law enforcement.

Law enforcement officials say extended-stay hotels and motels are popular with drug makers because they have working kitchens and allow them to remain nameless. Clandestine labs or meth labs may also be found in rural, city, and suburban residences; barns, garages, and other outbuildings; back rooms of businesses; storage facilities; vacant buildings; and vehicles.

If you work at a hotel, motel, apartment, or lease or rent property there are signs someone is manufacturing/cooking methamphetamine:

- Hotel or apartment windows are blacked-out or taped-up or doors are reinforced.
- An increase in activity, especially at night.
- Strong smell that might resemble urine or unusual chemical smell like ether, ammonia, or nail polish remover (acetone).
- Residents never put out their trash.
- Little or no traffic during the day, but lots of traffic at extremely late hours.
- Residents open windows in cold weather.
- Complaints from neighbors about strange smells coming from the property.

## What is a Clandestine Laboratory or Meth Lab?

A **clandestine laboratory or meth lab** is used to make illegally controlled substances, such as methamphetamine. These laboratories are typically small and use common household appliances, glassware, and readily available chemicals. While some clandestine laboratories may be located in business areas, they are most frequently located in residential or rural areas.

There are many different methods for producing methamphetamine. Each method has its own built-in dangers. Many of the chemicals used are caustic or corrosive and some of the processes create poisonous fumes. Additionally, many of the chemicals can be found in common household items such as lantern fuel, cleaners, acetone, muriatric acid and diet pills.

Clandestine laboratories present numerous hazards to people and the environment. Extreme potential for fires, explosions, and exposure to hazardous chemicals and fumes are but a few. Additionally, clandestine labs are considered hazardous waste sites and should only be entered by trained and equipped professionals. **Anyone finding a clandestine laboratory or meth lab should not enter and immediately contact local law enforcement or the Texas Department of Public Safety at 1-800-868-6274.**

## What Chemicals are Meth made from?

The processing required to make methamphetamine is easier and more accessible than ever, because of recipes and information about making methamphetamine available on the Internet. The drug can be made in a makeshift "lab" that can fit into a suitcase. Many over-the-counter medications and chemicals are ingredients used to produce methamphetamine: medications containing ephedrine or pseudoephedrine, red phosphorous, hydrochloric acid, anhydrous ammonia, drain cleaner, battery acid, lye, lantern fuel, and antifreeze. Some examples of common household chemicals used in a meth lab include flammable, volatile solvents, such as methanol, ether, benzene, methylene chloride, trichloroethane, and toluene. Other common household chemicals include muriatric acid, sodium hydroxide, table salt, and ammonia. Meth-related chemicals not commonly found in large amounts in homes include anhydrous ammonia, red phosphorous, iodine, reactive metals, and other solvents not listed above. Large amounts of industrial and agricultural chemicals, which are either purchased or stolen, are used in the production of methamphetamine and

are used in large labs known as "super" labs. Additionally, other hazardous chemicals can be formed during the "cooking" process.

However, the poor handling and disposal of these chemicals, as well as mixing incompatible compounds, can create hazards. These hazardous chemicals are sometimes dumped on the ground or in nearby streams and lakes, or simply left behind. These toxic waste products can remain for a long time as residue on bathtubs, toilets or sinks. As an example, motel rooms and apartments that are used to make meth can be a health risk to the next unsuspecting tenants.

For each pound of finished product, these labs typically have five to six pounds of hazardous waste left over which is most always disposed of inappropriately. Sometimes it's buried or taken to remote locations. Sometimes it's just flushed down the toilet. These waste products can sterilize soil and poison local water tables. Dumping it down the drain can contaminate municipal sewage systems by reacting with chemicals used in treatment plants. As a result of meth "cooking", many chemicals may contaminate a property. Some household materials, such as carpeting, wallboard, ceiling tile, or fabric, may actually absorb spilled chemicals. Furniture or draperies may also become contaminated. Soil or groundwater (including nearby drinking water wells) may become contaminated if chemicals are dumped in a septic system or on the ground.

**If someone smells strong odors, should the doors be opened or windows broken to relieve the odor before the criminal investigators arrive?**

No. Suspected methamphetamine labs should not be ventilated unless done by certified lab personnel, law enforcement, or individuals wearing the proper protective equipment.

## What happens after a meth lab is discovered?

When a meth lab is discovered, the local law enforcement agency is responsible for making arrests and seizing the lab. Evidence is removed from the site, and chemical hazard consultants are brought in by law enforcement to remove containers of hazardous chemicals related to the operation of the meth lab.

## What should local health departments do when called in after a meth lab seizure?

Before entering a former meth lab, call the local law enforcement agency to get information on the seizure. Ask about: the amounts and types of chemicals used in the meth production; whether there was evidence of solvent use, chemical spills, or unusual odors; where the production was occurring; whether it was a low or high production lab; and the general level of sanitation existing on the property.

**Will exposure to chemicals in a meth lab result in harmful health effects?**

While still in operation, or prior to a seizure, there is a high risk for acute exposure to harmful chemicals in meth labs. If you discover an **active** meth lab, do not attempt to enter. Contact your local law enforcement agency immediately.

Many of the chemicals used in the "cooking" process can be harmful. Short-term exposures to high concentrations of chemical vapors that may exist in a functioning meth lab can cause severe health problems or even death. For this reason, meth "cookers", their families, and first responders are at highest risk of acute health effects from chemical exposure, including lung damage and chemical burns to different parts of the body. Heating solvents inside a building can create a highly flammable situation; meth labs are often discovered when fire fighters respond to a blaze.

After a bust and seizure of a meth lab there is often only a low exposure risk to chemical residues, but this contamination needs to be cleaned up. However, properties often have serious sanitation and safety issues (i.e., physical and electrical hazards may exist). Sanitation issues can complicate the assessment of chemical hazard risk. Any evaluation needs to consider the overall condition of the property.

Chemical residues and lab wastes that are left behind at a former meth lab can also result in health problems for people who use the property. Unsuspecting people can touch residues of meth and have symptoms similar to those experienced by meth users. For this reason, local health departments should thoroughly assess the property for hazards prior to allowing it to be re-inhabited, especially by children.

When a meth lab is discovered in a multiple-unit dwelling, neighbors may be concerned about their exposure to hazardous chemicals while the lab was still active. While neighbors' risk for exposure is usually very low both before and after a meth lab bust, it is important to address any nearby residents' concerns.

## What kind of protective equipment can prevent chemical exposure?

All people entering a former meth lab should wear protective eye, hand, and foot covering; disposable gloves

(e.g. latex or nitrile); and a disposable protective jumpsuit (e.g. Tyvek). If toxic fumes or vapors are suspected, only trained professionals should enter and clean the building wearing protective equipment and equipped with a National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) approved air supply respiratory.

### What is the cost of cleaning up a clandestine methamphetamine lab?

Cleanups of labs are extremely resource-intensive and costly. The average cost of a cleanup is about $5,000, but some cost up to $100,000 or more.

### How can a meth lab be cleaned up?

Unfortunately the property owners are responsible for proper clean up and costs. Owners who decide to clean buildings on their own should be aware there are currently no official regulations on exactly how to clean up former meth labs in Texas, particularly the inside of a building. Situations are different in each meth lab. Sometimes scrubbing and painting is all that is necessary to restore a former meth lab to a safe living environment. Other times the contamination is so broad and extensive that the inside of the building needs complete renovation. Some meth labs require soil and/or groundwater cleanup as well, depending on the extent of how and where chemical wastes were managed. Also that household building materials and furniture may absorb contaminants and, in some cases, give off fumes. Private cleanup contractors can be hired to conduct building cleanup as well.

### What are acceptable clean up levels for buildings?

There are no pre-determined clean up levels inside a building or home for the many chemicals associated with meth labs. A risk assessment may be necessary to evaluate the potential for exposure on a case-by-case basis.

Until a former meth lab is cleaned, no one should enter the area without protective hand and foot coverings. Furthermore, no one should rent, purchase, or occupy the site of the former meth lab without approval from the local or state law enforcement agency.

### General guidelines for building clean up

- *General sanitation*
  Be aware that general sanitation issues often exist at former meth labs. These issues can complicate the site assessment process, and may include general filth, squalor, and rodent and pest infestations.

- *Air out the building*
  After law enforcement officials seize a lab, professionals trained to handle hazardous materials are called in to remove lab waste and any bulk chemicals. During this removal, every effort is made to air out the building for the safety of the removal crew. For security reasons, the building is usually closed upon their departure. The short-term airing-out may not be sufficient to clear the indoor air of solvents that were spilled and remain inside. The building should be aired out for several days before and during cleaning. Exhaust fans can also be set up to circulate the air. During this time, the building should remain off limits unless it is necessary to make short visits to the property.
  After the cleaning and airing-out the building, it should be re-checked for staining and odors. If the initial cleaning was not successful, more extensive steps should be taken.

- *Remove and dispose of contamination*
  During the meth "cooking" process, splashed and spilled chemicals, supplies and equipment, may have contaminated non-lab items. Remove, double-bag, and properly dispose of any items that are visibly contaminated.
  If you find suspicious containers or lab equipment at the property, do not handle them. Leave the area and contact your local law enforcement agency or fire department. It's possible that some items may have been accidentally left behind by law enforcement. If a Hazardous Materials Clean Up Team searched the property, the items are probably not dangerous. But, some items may be overlooked in the debris or confusion.
  Absorbent materials, such as carpeting, drapes, clothing, furniture, etc., can accumulate dust or splattered chemicals during "cooking." It is recommended these materials be disposed of if an odor or discoloration is present.

- *Inspect surfaces, remove or clean as needed*
  Surfaces, such as walls, counters, floors, and ceilings, are porous and can hold contamination from the meth "cooking" or preparation process. Clean up is important because of frequent contact with these surfaces, e.g. food preparation, etc.
  If a surface has visible contamination, staining, or gives off odors, complete removal and replacement of the surface is recommended. This could include removal and replacement of wallboard, floor coverings and counters.
  Appliances where meth was stored or "cooked", such as refrigerators, kitchen ranges, or ovens, should be disposed of and replaced.
  Wear gloves, protective clothing, such as long sleeves, and eye protection while cleaning. Again, ventilation of the building should be continued throughout the cleaning process.

- *Inspect plumbing*
  While some of the waste products generated during meth manufacture may be thrown along the sides of roads or in yards, most are dumped down sinks, drains, and toilets. These waste products can collect in drains, traps, and septic tanks and give off fumes.
  If a strong chemical odor is coming from household plumbing, do not attempt to address the problem yourself. Contact a plumbing contractor for professional assistance. Let the contractor know that the property is a former meth lab and inform him/her of the types and quantities of chemicals that may have been routinely flushed down the drains. If you suspect the septic tank or yard may be contaminated, contact the local health department.
- *Repaint surfaces*
  After a surface has been cleaned, painting that surface should be considered, especially where contamination was found or suspected.
  If there is any remaining contamination not removed by cleaning, painting the surface puts a barrier between the contamination and anyone who may come in contact with those surfaces. Painting will cover up and "lock" the contamination onto the surface, reducing the chance of it being released into the air.

## Summary steps for building clean up:

1. Contact your local law enforcement agency to determine what chemicals were present at the time of seizure.
2. Have local law enforcement personnel accompany you when visiting the site.
3. Thoroughly ventilate the building before and during clean up.
4. Until a former meth lab is cleaned, do not enter the area without personal protective equipment covering eyes, hands, and feet.
5. Remove and dispose of all unnecessary items.
6. Remove visibly contaminated items or items that have an odor.
7. Clean all surfaces using household cleaning methods while wearing proper personal protection.
8. Leave plumbing cleaning to the experts.
9. Air out the building for 3 to 5 days.
10. If odors or staining remain, have the building evaluated by a professional.

**If you suspect that someone is producing meth, contact your local law enforcement or call the Texas Department of Public Safety at 1-800-868-6274.**

Remember to practice safety. Don't learn it by accident.

This publication was published with information from the Kansas Bureau of Investigation, the Wisconsin Department of Health, the Texas Department of Public Safety, and the Texas Workers' Compensation Commission

TEXAS WORKERS' COMPENSATION COMMISSION

*Safety Violations Hotline*
**1-800-452-9595**
**safetyhotline@twcc.state.tx.us**

*provided by*
Texas Workers' Compensation Commission
E-mail **resource.center@twcc.state.tx.us**
or call (512) 804-4620 for more information.