

Methamphetamine Labs (Dangers to Your Building)

by Chris Hockley

Methamphetamine (meth) is a powerful, highly toxic, addictive drug that is illegally “cooked” in make-shift labs. Meth can be found in the form of pills, capsules, powder or chunks; it can be smoked, snorted, injected or eaten. Meth was developed from amphetamine, but has much stronger effects on the central nervous system. Meth is also called crank, speed, crystal or ice.

Common Meth Lab Supplies

- Plastic tubing
- Mason jars
- Propane tanks (sometimes spray-painted or burned with bent or tampered valves)
- Camp stove fuel
- Empty pill bottles
- Empty cans of toluene, alcohol or paint thinner
- Ammonia
- Starter Fluid
- Glass containers
- Coffee filters with red stains
- Funnels
- Rock salt, iodine
- Lithium batteries
- Hydrogen peroxide
- Pseudoephedrine tablets

Warning Signs of Living Near a Lab

- Strong odor of solvents
- Windows blacked out
- Iodine or chemical stained bathroom or kitchen fixtures
- Renters who pay landlords in cash
- Increased activity at night
- Excessive trash

If You Suspect a Meth Lab

Do not enter a site that you think may be used for cooking meth. Labs present extreme dangers from explosions and exposure to hazardous chemicals. Breathing the fumes and handling substances can cause injury and even death.

Drug labs are considered hazardous waste sites and should only be entered by trained and equipped professionals.

Never handle materials you suspect were used for making meth, such as contaminated glassware and needles. Skin contact can result in burns or poisoning. Handling items can also cause some of the chemicals to explode on contact with water or air.

Consider that when professionals respond to a drug lab, they do not enter the building until they have put on chemically resistant suits and boots, special gloves and respirators.

Health Risks

Meth can cause long-term health effects including cancer, brain damage, birth defects and miscarriages. It can also cause memory loss, heart problems, aggression and violence.

Meth causes health problems not just for the users, but also for others who are unintentionally exposed to the chemical.

People who enter a drug lab after a police bust has been completed, but before it has been properly cleaned and ventilated may feel headaches, nausea, dizziness and fatigue. These symptoms usually go away after several hours.

Meth Lab Blues

Mrs. Darcy Smith owned a small rental house in the suburbs of her Oregon town. She had inherited the house from her parents and had successfully been renting it for 20 years. Usually the previous tenant would find a new tenant, so it was almost never vacant. Rent came in like clockwork, and the tenants never called her for repairs. As a matter of fact, it had been three years since she had stopped by the property for a visual inspection. Her current tenant was the daughter of a friend of who was working at the local motel as a housekeeper.

One Friday morning as she was reading her paper, the telephone rang. It was the sheriff's office. They asked if she would please come down to her rental property immediately. Being a law-abiding citizen, she immediately jumped in her car and drove the 15 minutes in her rental house. What she saw when she arrived astonished her. The sheriff had just raided her house and arrested her tenant and the tenant's boyfriend. The investigators were wearing special suits with oxygen tanks on their backs. They looked like they were heading into space.

She approached the sergeant at the scene. "Hi, I am Darcy Smith the owner of this house. You asked me to come down. Can you tell me what is going on?" Sergeant Ungerth looked at her and said, "We just arrested your tenants for manufacturing methamphetamine." Darcy was shocked. Her house! Her tenant! What was she going to do?

Sergeant Ungerth then explained to her that he had called the county Meth Lab Team to examine the house. When they had completed their evidence search, she could have her house back. Tenants, however, could not live in it until she had gone through the correct procedures to clean the house.

Darcy asked the sergeant where she could get more information and he directed her to the state department of health which had an informative website. He also provided her with the name of an individual who could give her advice regarding the meth lab clean-up, but cautioned her that she should contact her attorney regarding how to evict the tenants.

The sergeant estimated clean-up costs of approximately \$12,000.00, but said that prices may vary from vendor to vendor and that Darcy might want to get bids. Darcy left the scene, totally dazed. What had she done wrong, and what was she going to do now?

What Could Darcy Have Done To Prevent This?

- Screen her tenants more carefully.
- Not let her friends' grown child move in without a background check.
- Regular inspections of the property (a minimum of once a year).
- If the tenants did not let her in to inspect the property, she would have cause for concern and a motivation to remove them.

She should have known that the boyfriend moved in, and she should have screened him too. His history of drug abuse and manufacture might have been an early warning sign.

Site Inspection

As she inspected the house, she could have been looking for the following clues:

- Smell: A strong cat urine smell, ether, ammonia, vinegar, solvent smells may also exist.
- Tenant behavior: Very high strung, talk very fast, want you in and out of the unit, or they don't want you in at all. Frequent visitors at all hours of the day and night.
- Other evidence: Blister packs of ephedrine, cylinders, evidence of anhydrous ammonia, or hydrochloric acid, evidence of empty solvent containers, mason jars, plastic tubing, rock salt, hydrogen peroxide, lithium batteries, coffee filters with red stains.
- Additional evidence: Yellow or red stains on countertops, carpets or linoleum.
- Blacked out windows, or those covered with foil.

She should immediately contact the police, the state health department or an industrial hygienist to confirm her suspicions.

Tests usually take a week to come back, and can cost up to \$500 or more depending on the size of the property and/or the number of rooms. While waiting for the test results, she should call her insurance company (or the tenant's insurance company) and see if they will pay to clean up the property. This is highly unlikely, but you never know...

If methamphetamine is confirmed, Darcy would need to ask the tenants to move out—the police will advise on this. Once she has control of the property, she would need to begin the clean-up process.

She should not hire her handyman or cleaning crew to clean up the unit for re-rent.

Methamphetamine is dangerous if inhaled and/or touched, as are the products used during the manufacture. Darcy does not want to incur any liability or chance of being sued by her regular contractors, nor does she want to have the liability of being sued by the future tenants if the property is not properly cleaned.

Clean-Up

Clean-up includes both the insides and outside of the building.

- Air out the building.
- Removal of contaminated materials:
 - Carpets, carpet pads, Linoleum, drapes and blinds, air-filters, refrigerators, range, water heater, all tenant clothing and their furniture.
 - Removal needs to be to a site that accepts contaminated product.
 - All people that remove these items need to be specially trained and certified.
 - Surfaces: extensive cleaning and replacement if the cooking occurred on those surfaces. After extensive wash down with bleach and other cleaners, seal walls and floors to seal in any contamination.
 - Ventilation systems: furnaces and heaters will either need to be replaced or cleaned throughout all ductwork.
 - Plumbing: you might need to replace sinks, toilets and other accessible plumbing due to methamphetamine odors since meth residual was not likely deposited down the drains.
 - Repainting: make sure the walls, ceilings and closets are cleaned, sealed and then painted.
 - Windows: make sure they have been cleaned as well as the tracks. If the unit was especially heavily used, replace all of the windows.
 - Doors in and outside need to be painted and door hardware needs to be washed down.
 - Exterior: Does the yard need to be cleaned up? Is there methamphetamine debris in the yard?

If the cost of clean up is too high, then Darcy can make the choice to demolish the building (though the materials would still need to be hauled to a special facility for disposal).

After The Unit Has Been Cleaned

- Have the industrial hygienist go back to the unit and test again to make sure the meth residual is totally cleaned up.
- If the unit is cleaned up and certified so by industrial hygienist, find out if the state requires a certificate of fitness (occupancy permit) that will warranty that the space is safe for a tenant to move in or for the property to be sold.
- Try to recover costs from the tenants.

Sunday morning Darcy was sitting at her breakfast table reading the paper and saw splashed on the front page "Darcy Smith House Site of Methamphetamine Raid." She cringed inside. She should have inspected the property regularly, screened her tenants more carefully, and not been such a hands-off landlord. A tear dripped from the corner of her eye. Ah well, it was another lesson learned the hard way.

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