

Inspectors Beware: The Dangers of Meth Labs

by Wayne Meyer

Published August 2005

There's an epidemic sweeping the Midwest that presents health, safety and business risks to home inspectors, and the same hidden hazards may be present in your region. According to the Minnesota Department of Health, there is widespread use of homes, garages, sheds, even motor vehicles to manufacture illegal drugs, specifically methamphetamine. More than 500 clandestine drug labs were identified in Minnesota in 2003. All were potential hazardous waste sites, requiring evaluation, and cleanup, by hazardous waste (HazMat) professionals.



While the drug task force struggles to contain crystal methamphetamine abuse, the Minnesota Department of Health reports that health officials are trying to come to terms with the drug's hidden danger: contaminated homes where meth was "cooked" leave toxic residue for unwitting occupants. Because this is a relatively new situation, unwitting home inspectors may find themselves starting a home inspection without knowing the signs of a contaminated home, or unaware of how important it is to be able to identify this situation for their client. *(Photo: A box meth lab stored under the sink. Photo courtesy of North Little Rock Police Department.)*

Methamphetamine is made mostly from common household ingredients. When these ingredients are mixed and cooked together, they make a dangerous drug and potentially harmful chemical residues can remain on household surfaces for months or years after cooking has been completed. There may be health effects associated with these chemical exposures before, during and after the drug-making process.

Because the failure to recognize even one contaminated home can jeopardize a home inspector's health, safety and service to the client, we all need to be able to quickly recognize a current or former meth lab and to know what our local law enforcement officials recommend we do.

Using information from drug task force agents, Minnesota's Department of Health and its Bureau of Criminal Apprehension, www.streetdrugs.org and www.kci.org/meth_info, I created the following checklist of common signs of meth manufacturing inside and outside a house.

- Unusual, strong odors (similar to cat urine, ether, ammonia, acetone or other chemicals)
- Windows blacked out
- Dark red phosphorous stains in the sinks, toilets and/or bathtubs, or red staining on the interior walls, counter tops and flooring
- Signs of chemical burns and spills on the counter tops and flooring
- Visible areas in the yard where chemicals have been dumped
- Dead or dying vegetation
- Burn pits outside with chemical container remains
- Packaging or containers from cold medicines
- Coffee filters unused and used with red stains in them
- Excessive trash with large amounts of the following: alcohol, ether, benzene, toluene/paint thinner, freon, acetone, chloroform, camp stove fuel, starting fluid, antifreeze, anhydrous ammonia, "Heet," white gasoline, phenyl-2-propane, phenylacetone, phenylpropanolamine, iodine crystals, red phosphorous, black iodine, lye (Red Devil lye), Drano, muriatic/hydrochloric acid, battery acid/sulfuric

acid, epsom salts, batteries/lithium, sodium metal, wooden matches, propane cylinders, hot plates, ephedrine (over-the-counter), cold tablets, bronchodilators, energy boosters, rock salt, diet aids

The law enforcement officials I spoke with advised me against entering a house with these conditions because it could be a crime scene, and even more important, it could be hazardous to my safety. They recommend reporting any suspected meth labs to local law enforcement.

No easy cleanup



Potential homebuyers need to know that the Minnesota state health department warns that meth labs can be highly dangerous; therefore, they should only be entered by cleanup professionals. *(Photo: Red phosphorous stains at tub drain. Photo courtesy of the author.)*

Meth manufacturing or cooking leaves behind 5 to 7 pounds of chemical waste for each pound of meth that is produced. These byproducts are considered hazardous waste. Therefore, the cleanup is subject not only to local ordinances, but also to Minnesota's hazardous waste rules. In rare cases, proper cleanup may require demolition of a contaminated structure. Most situations will require a middle course involving one of the following measures:

- **REMOVAL:** Furnishings, draperies, carpeting, wallpaper, paneling, etc.
- **VENTILATION:** When solvents and other chemicals that may have soaked into the walls are slowly vaporizing.
- **NEUTRALIZATION:** Where acids or bases have been used, the potential for harmful effects may be reduced or removed through neutralization.
- **DETERGENT-WATER WASHING:** Some nonporous and semi-porous surfaces such as floors, tiles, walls and ceilings can be cleaned with detergent washing.
- **ENCAPSULATION or SEALING:** Contamination may be covered with layers of oil-based paint, polyurethane or other materials.

Outdoor contamination may be dealt with using one or more of the following methods:

- Waste removal
- Drainage control
- Removal of soils
- Provision for alternate water supply
- Site control fencing



According to the Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension, local police have found chemical waste dumped down tub and sink drains, in outhouses and stuffed down icehouses' augured holes. Private septic systems and wells have been damaged by disposal of the cooks' remaining by-products. The cleanup, plus repairing or replacing these systems could be costly for someone buying a former meth lab house. *(Photo: This home housed a meth lab. Photo courtesy of the author.)*

As this epidemic continues, the likelihood increases that home inspectors will encounter a contaminated home. But home inspectors can be prepared to protect themselves and their clients by knowing the signs and bringing in the local authorities to assess the situation.

Telltale Signs of Meth Lab Abuse

(Photos and text courtesy of Boulder County Health Department, Boulder, Colo.)



Fire Damage

The manufacture of meth can be a highly explosive process. This was a home

kitchen.

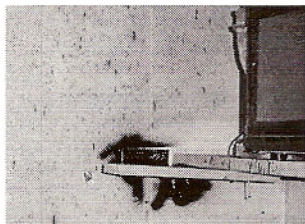
**Box Lab**

Meth labs can be contained inside a simple cardboard box.

Look for piping attached to odd containers, beakers, jars and funnels; bi-layered liquids; or strange and powerful odors

**Blister Packs**

Over-the-counter cold remedies containing ephedrine or pseudophedrine are used to make meth. Unusually large quantities of these products, or large numbers of "blister packs" being disposed, may indicate the presence of a meth lab.

**Iodine Stains**

Yellow-brown stains on the wall could be created by iodine byproducts from meth production. Removing drywall can be a costly process. All of the drywall must be removed to ensure the safety of future occupants.

**Stained Coffee Filters**

Coffee filters stained unusually bright colors can be a sign of a meth lab.

[Member Login](#) | [Home](#) | [Search](#) | [In This Issue](#) | [Archive](#) | [Advertiser Directory](#) | [Subscribe](#) | [Contact Editor](#)

[ASHI Home](#) | [Join ASHI](#) | [ASHI Store](#) | [Chapters](#) | [ASHI Job Board](#) | [Discussion Forum](#) | [Education](#) | [Contact ASHI](#)

© 2005 ASHI Reporter