

Meth House Nightmare

A common misconception about meth labs is that a meth lab is a place where methamphetamine is manufactured. Colorado Statutes defines a meth lab so liberally that it includes places where meth has been used or manufacturing equipment, wastes or chemicals have been stored. Making things more risky is the fact that a house may receive the meth lab designation on the word of a trash collector, or other untrained person.

When a house is designated a meth house, law enforcement officers may arrive unannounced, evict the residents with no belongings and close the building to all but law enforcement personnel and industrial hygienists (IH). It's estimated that there are about 2400 meth labs in residential buildings in Colorado.

The owners may have the property tested by an IH and released after proper remediation. At this time, a Decision Statement is issued. If the IH issuing the statement is properly credentialed, the owner is then protected from future lawsuits. This must be done within 120 days. The catch is that every item in the building must be tested and cleared by an IH. Because the expense usually prohibits this, all the contents of the home are often destroyed.

If remediation requirements are not met, the governing body will seize the property, rehab it and sell it to pay their expenses. The owner usually receives nothing except debt, even if the property was purchased from a person who covered up the evidence of meth manufacturing. Unless it can be proven that he/she knew about the meth and purposely hid the evidence, you probably have no recourse.

There is new legislation in process that will require disclosure if it is known that a property has ever been a meth house. It has even been suggested that every house sold in Colorado be inspected for meth. This provision is not likely to pass since it would add about \$5000 to each sale in the form of industrial hygienist fees.

The dangers that go along with meth houses include exposure to cancer causing chemicals that can saturate walls, carpets and other building materials as well as all contents. Lead and mercury are common byproducts. Chemicals, such as solvents, may be disposed of in plumbing or simply poured on the ground. If not removed properly these can cause various health problems.

The most immediate danger is the meth manufacturer. Meth causes extreme paranoia and symptoms similar to OCD, obsessive compulsive disorder. Howard Hughes had OCD. In the movie, *The Aviator*, there were scenes where Hughes locked himself in a dark room out of fear (paranoia). He collected junk and bottles of urine. He lived amongst the growing clutter. This is similar to meth houses that have been raided. Meth users called "Tinkle Tweakers" even save their urine in bottles stored in living areas to reclaim the unmetabolized meth from the urine.

Most people with OCD are pretty harmless except to themselves. The paranoid meth user can be very dangerous according to police reports. They are often reported to have large, sometimes bizarre, weapon collections that may be heavy on knives. Booby traps are reportedly set to protect the person's meth stash. If you encounter a

property where the residents appear to have OCD, and the residents act strangely, leave immediately. You could be in danger.

Meth users and manufacturers include people from all lifestyles. Doctors, lawyers and dentists are no more immune than factory workers or roofers. Meth labs are found in neighborhoods from affluent to poor.

When you enter a property take a deep breath. A cat urine smell is often associated with meth. Other odors to be aware of are ammonia, vanilla, solvents or metallic smells. These are warning signs.

Meth users sometimes become obsessive about objects. They may dismantle things like remote controls, watches or electronic devices. The objects can sometimes be found in a pile dismantled down to the smallest part.

Large amounts of household products are a tip off. Common products are used to manufacture meth that can be found in an average home, except in a meth lab large quantities of common items may be in odd places. If you see multiple packages of lye, Heet, Coleman fuel, peroxide, pseudo-ephedrine or coffee filters in odd places, like stored in a bathroom, closet or kitchen, this is an indication that it may be wise to forget any involvement in the property. The occupant may be a warehouse club shopper with no sense of organization, but he/she may not be.

Propane bottles, or fire extinguishers, that have been altered, or have a blue stain on the connector, may indicate that anhydrous ammonia has been stored in the container. Anhydrous ammonia can be explosive in the right circumstances. It reacts with the metal leaving the connector corroded.

Iodine may be used in meth manufacturing. Iodine is a substance that goes from solid to gas state without becoming liquid. It sticks to everything and spreads on contact. Iodine stains walls and everything else. The stain may be red or yellow. It may be very noticeable if a photo, or other wall hanging is moved, revealing the contrast between stained and unstained.

Meth labs may be hidden behind false walls or other building alterations. Alterations that make no sense should be suspect, such as: exhaust fans mounted where they have no logical use; bootlegged power supply; rooms that are unexplainably small.

Inspection Perfection provides a quick, inexpensive test kit to detect minute residue from the use or manufacture of amphetamine or methamphetamine. A sterile swab is rubbed over a surface where residue may be left from smoking or handling meth. The swab is immersed in a reagent that turns purple or blue if amphetamine or methamphetamine residue is present.

A positive test may happen in places where meth has been used, as well as manufactured. This test is for the actual residue of the drug only. It doesn't test for chemicals used in the manufacture or those that are produced in the process. A positive test tells you to proceed with caution.

The following list by: *Chemist Lynn Riemer Of The North Metro Drug Task Force*

Meth lab signs

- **Yellow discoloration** on walls, drains, sinks and showers
- **Blue discoloration** on valves of propane tanks and fire extinguishers
- **Fire detectors** that are removed or taped off
- **Experiencing physical symptoms** while inside the house, such as burning in your eyes or throat, itching, a metallic taste in your mouth and breathing problems
- **Unusual strong odors** that smell like materials from a garage, such as solvent and paint thinner, cat urine or ammonia
- **The use of security cameras and surveillance equipment**

Signs that property owners should look for with their homes and tenants:

- **Tenants who behave** oddly and are extremely thin, have open sores, bad teeth or dilated pupils
- **Large amounts** of trash with items such as lithium batteries, torn-apart matchbooks, water bottles, cold medicine packs and antifreeze containers
- **Discolored coffee** filters that are not brown
- **Plexiglas** or other dark-colored cookware
- **Glass containers** with two layered liquids and chemistry sets

Thanks to Caoimhin Connors, our IH who provided the basic info for this article. He consulted with CO state Senator Brandon about the presently proposed legislation. He was also involved in writing the present meth lab laws. His recently updated website (2/06) provides info on current CO meth lab regulations: <http://www.forensic-applications.com/meth/coloregs.html>