

Guidelines for Cleaning Up Former Methamphetamine Labs

Cooperative effort by:

- Oklahoma Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs
- Oklahoma State Bureau of Investigation
- Oklahoma State Department of Health
- Oklahoma Department of Environmental Quality

How should these Guidelines be used?

Meth (methamphetamine) labs, used to make the illegal drug methamphetamine, turn up in houses, apartments, motel rooms, sheds, trailers and even motor vehicles. In 2000, federal, state and local authorities seized more than 940 labs in Oklahoma alone. The number of lab seizures by law enforcement increases each year.

As agencies seek to restrict the products needed to make methamphetamine, the methods and locations of production are changing. This adds to the difficulty health and environmental agencies face in assessing meth related health risks.

These basic guidelines are a cooperative effort of the Oklahoma Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs, the Oklahoma State Bureau of Investigation, the Oklahoma State Department of Health and the Oklahoma Department of Environmental Quality. For large cleanups and in any circumstances when the landlord or leasing agent feels that confirmatory testing or assistance with the cleanup is needed, private environmental companies can be identified in a local or regional yellow pages phone book under "Environmental."

How can you find out if a property has been used to make meth?

The Oklahoma Bureau of Narcotics is responsible for tracking properties used as meth labs. You can call your local law enforcement agency to confirm that a seizure of chemicals took place on the property, and to obtain the name of any hazardous materials contractor who may have removed materials. The contractor should have a list of what chemicals were present.

Why the concern about cleaning up clandestine labs?

Properties used to produce meth will usually have containers of chemicals such as solvents, ether, paint thinners, phosphorus, acids and bases, or anhydrous ammonia. Other lab equipment, cooking or storage containers, or heat sources may also be present. Typically, the contractor removes the bulk of any lab-related debris such as chemicals and containers after a lab is discovered by law enforcement. However, small amounts of chemicals may have contaminated surfaces, drains, sinks, ventilation systems and absorbent materials (couches, carpets, beds etc.). The meth lab contaminants may pose serious health threats to persons exposed to them.

People can be exposed by breathing the air that may contain suspended contaminant particles as dust, by touching surfaces that are contaminated, by eating or drinking from glasses or dishes that have layers of contaminated grime, or by eating or smoking after their hands are in contact with contaminated areas. Furnace air filters and drains may also have contamination in them. Children should never be allowed into these areas until cleaning is finished.

What are the possible health effects from exposure to meth lab contaminants?

Many of the contaminants used in meth labs can be harmful if people are exposed. Health problems may include breathing problems or respiratory irritation, skin and eye irritation, headaches, nausea and dizziness. High exposures even for a short time can cause death or severe lung damage and skin or throat burns.

Health effects from long-term exposure after meth labs have been removed have not been studied extensively. The safest thing to do is make sure the area is cleaned up properly and any remaining contamination removed. The safest possible cleaning practice is to avoid exposure by using an environmental contractor who has the proper safety equipment and can verify by monitoring that all the contamination has been removed. Listings for these contractors may be found in your local or regional telephone book under environmental contractors.

If you must do the cleanup without the help of a contractor, here are some steps to follow.

Air out the property. After a lab is seized by law enforcement officials, professionals trained to handle hazardous materials are generally called in to remove lab wastes and bulk chemicals. During this removal, every effort is made to air out the property for the safety of the removal crew. For security reasons, the property is usually closed after they leave. This short-term airing-out may not be enough to clear out all the contaminants from the air inside the home. Be sure the property has been aired out for several days before entering it to clean. After the initial airing out, good ventilation should continue until the cleanup is finished.

Spilled chemicals and supplies may have contaminated non-lab equipment. Items that are visibly contaminated should be removed from the property and taken to a landfill. Do not set the items out at the curb for trash pickup since many times people do rummage through trash. (For assistance in locating the nearest landfill, call the DEQ local office listed in your telephone book.)

If you find suspicious containers or chemicals, do not attempt to handle them yourself. Leave the area and call local law enforcement or the fire department. Some items may have been overlooked in the search of the property by law enforcement or the cleanup contractor.

To help the volatilization or evaporation of some chemicals, close the windows and doors and raise the heat setting on the furnace before you begin cleaning and leave the property. Do not use

a space heater or open flame heating device to heat the property. This may raise the heat to about 90 degrees for several days. (During the summer you may just turn off the air conditioning, close the windows and doors and leave the property.) After several days, begin the cleaning process with all the windows open and the heat turned off until the furnace filters are replaced. Surfaces such as walls, counters, floors and ceilings can hold contamination from the lab, especially where the preparation and cooking took place or chemicals were stored. Cleaning these areas is very important because future tenants may come in contact with those surfaces during cooking or playing.

If a surface has visible contamination or staining, complete removal or replacement of the surface is recommended. This could include removal or replacement of wallboard, floor coverings or counters. If this is not possible, intensive cleaning, followed by a physical barrier such as paint, linoleum, or epoxy should be used. These areas should be monitored and the barrier maintained.

Normal household cleaning products and procedures should remove the remainder of the contamination. Be very careful in the use of bleach since hydrochloric acid, sulfuric acid, or other types of acid may react with the bleach and cause dangerous vapors to form. Don't forget to wear gloves and protective clothing such as long sleeves and pants, as well as eye protection. Respirators that offer protection against vapors are recommended. The ventilation system should also be cleaned and new furnace filters installed. All gloves, rags and clothing that are in contact with contamination (even shoes) should be removed before leaving the house and disposed of with the other household items that require disposal.

Next, air the building out for a few days to allow any remaining volatiles to escape. During this time, the property should stay vacant.

The property should then be checked for odors or staining on walls or sinks etc. and recleaned if necessary. Absorbent materials such as carpeting, drapes, clothing etc. can accumulate vapors during the meth preparation. These materials should be disposed of properly, especially if staining and odors are present.

Special cleaning areas

Ventilation systems (heating and air conditioning) tend to collect fumes and dust and redistribute them throughout a home. The ducts, ductwork, filters and even walls and ceilings near the ductwork can be contaminated. Replace all of the air filters in the system, open and clean vents, clean the surfaces near system inlets and clean the system's ductwork.

Plumbing may be contaminated from waste products being poured into drains or stools. These waste products can collect in the drains, traps and septic tanks and give off fumes.

If a strong chemical odor comes from household plumbing, do not attempt to clean the drains yourself. Call a plumber and explain the situation. If you suspect the septic system or yard may be contaminated, contact the local DEQ office for guidance.

Should testing be done after cleanup?

If you are concerned about any of the remaining contamination, after cleaning your residence or rental property, or if your property still has an odor, visible staining, or causes physical irritation to those exposed, it is advisable to have the property tested for chemical residues. Sampling is an expensive option but may provide peace of mind for property owners and families. You may want to contact your insurance carrier for advice and assistance.

Remember these steps to cleaning a former meth property:

1. Determine if the property was used for meth production.
2. Air out the property before and during cleanup.
3. Before entering the property to clean, put on personal protective equipment such as gloves, protective clothing, and eye protection. Respirators that offer protection against vapors are recommended.
4. Remove all unnecessary items and dispose of them properly.
5. Remove all visibly contaminated items or items that have an odor.
6. Clean all surfaces using proper household cleaning methods and proper personal protection.
7. Clean the ventilation system.
8. Leave plumbing cleanup to the experts.
9. Air out the property for three to five days.
10. If odor or staining remains, have your home evaluated by a professional.
11. Dispose of clothing, gloves, brushes and rags used during the cleaning process.
12. Review additional guidance on personal decontamination provided by local law enforcement.