



Methamphetamine (Meth) Labs After the Bust – What Now?



The problem of clandestine meth labs has been steadily growing in Indiana over the last decade. Illegal labs are being discovered in houses, apartments, garages, motel rooms, motor vehicles, and various other places. When a lab is found, the Indiana State Police typically will remove drugs, chemicals, ingredients, and equipment to be used as evidence. Chemical and drug residues often remain on nonporous surfaces, in absorbent materials, and in sinks, drains, and ventilation systems. Production of one pound of meth will create approximately six pounds of waste. Some local health departments have been contacted and asked to give guidance for cleanup and/or asked to verify safety for reoccupation. Since this is an emerging problem, there are currently no official guidance documents or regulations in Indiana on these issues. This document is an effort to give some general guidance, along with resources where more detailed information may be obtained.

While normally found in small amounts, meth lab contaminants may pose health threats to persons exposed to them. Short term exposure symptoms may range from headache, nausea, and dizziness, which usually go away after several hours, to more severe symptoms such as shortness of breath, cough, chest pain, chemical irritation and burns, and even death. There is little known about the health effects of long term exposure. Because of these possible health effects and until a former meth lab has been cleaned, no one should enter the area without appropriate levels of training and use of personal protective equipment.

More importantly, no one should rent, purchase, or occupy a former meth lab property unless cleanup has occurred.

No cleanup levels exist for many chemicals associated with meth labs, and because every lab site is different, there is no template for decontamination. Responses in other states have ranged from doing nothing to complete demolition of the property. An assessment may be necessary to evaluate the potential for exposure on a case-by-case basis.

To conduct an assessment of the property, the following equipment and supplies may be required:

- personal protective equipment (PPE)
- Photo ionization detector (PID) or similar device
- pH paper
- de-ionized water
- camera
- sample collection supplies

An assessment should include most, if not all, of the following steps:

- Acquire information about the recipes and methods used in the lab as well as the chemicals and equipment found.
- Air out the property before entering and use appropriate PPE.
- Visually inspect the property, both indoors and outdoors, noting all odors, stains, residues, and signs of burial, dumping, and burning of waste. Be sure to include such areas as attics, crawl spaces, and all outbuildings.
- Sample ambient air in every room and every disposal drain using a PID.
- Check for presence of corrosive residues using pH paper.
- Collect and label samples of residues, soil, ash, etc. for analysis.
- Collect drinking water and septic tank samples if ground water contamination is suspected in homes served by a well and/or a septic system.
- Document findings and sampling activities with photographs.

Based on the results of the assessment, a cleanup plan can be formulated. A safe way to ensure proper cleanup is to hire a company trained in hazardous substance remediation. Absent an assessment, the following general guidelines are the minimum recommendations for cleaning a former meth lab site:

- Ventilate the property before and during cleanup. Ventilation for three to five days after cleanup is recommended.
- Wear appropriate personal protection while cleaning.
- Remove all unnecessary items and dispose of them. If there is a question about cleaning versus disposal, disposal is the preferred option.
- Remove and dispose of visibly contaminated items as well as items that have an odor.
- Dispose of, or clean thoroughly, any absorbent materials, such as carpeting, drapes, upholstery, and clothing that are not visibly contaminated.
- Clean dishes, flatware, and other nonporous household items by washing and rinsing twice using hot water and detergent. Dispose of them if they were used in the meth making process.
- Clean all nonporous surfaces using household cleaning methods and materials. Painting the surface after cleaning should be considered.
- Thoroughly clean the ventilation system and replace all the air filters.
- If the plumbing is connected to a septic tank it should be pumped by a licensed waste hauler and disposed of at a permitted wastewater treatment facility.
- Ensure that the water supply meets appropriate standards.

Note: Only the most heavily contaminated meth lab items require special disposal. Most can generally be disposed in a state permitted solid waste disposal facility.

For more information on any of the above topics, or for more detailed cleaning instructions, please refer to the following publications:

Guidelines for Cleaning Up Former Methamphetamine Labs, Missouri Dept. of Health
www.dhss.state.mo.us/TopicsA-Z/MethLabCleanupGuidelines.pdf

Clandestine Drug Labs General Cleanup Guidelines, Minnesota Dept. of Health
www.health.state.mn.us/divs/eh/meth

Guidelines for Environmental Sampling at Illegal Drug manufacturing Sites, Washington State Dept. of Health
www.doh.wa.gov/ehp/ts/pubs-cdl.htm

Methamphetamine Clean Up, Assured Decontamination Service
www.deconservices.com/meth/meth.html

* This information has been prepared by the General Environmental Health Services Committee of The Indiana Environmental Health Association. It is intended to provide guidance to public and environmental health officials when dealing with a meth contaminated property. It is not to be considered an all inclusive document, additional site specific information and research may be required. As new regulations develop the contents of this guidance may change. (7/22/2005)

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