

# Methamphetamines (P) and Contractors

## The problem

Contractors working within houses contaminated with methamphetamine ("P") could be put at risk of exposure to the effects of chemicals. Under the Health and Safety at Work Act (2015) both the council and contractors have responsibilities to recognize these hazards and protect workers from the effects.

### *The signs*

Workers should be aware of the typical signs that a property may be contaminated with methamphetamine, these include:

- Unusual chemical smells that are not normally present in the area. A tell-tale sign of a meth lab is a powerful chemical smell. The odour of an active meth lab may smell like:
  - Paint thinner or varnish smell.
  - Ether or a "hospital smell".
  - Sour or vinegary smell.
  - Ammonia-like smell (like the smell of window cleaner, fertilizers or even cat urine).
- Numerous chemical containers (labelled solvent, acid, flammable) stored or stock piled.
- Stained glass equipment and cookware.
- Plastic or glass containers fitted with glass or rubber tubing.
- Numerous cold tablet packages lying around or in the rubbish.
- Portable gas tanks or other cylinders not normally seen or used in the area.
- Chemical stains around household kitchen sink, laundry, toilet or stormwater drains.
- Yellow/brown staining of interior floor, wall, ceiling and appliance surfaces.

Meth labs are usually equipped with items such as:

- Pyrex, glass or Corning containers, mason jars or other kitchen glassware (these may be fitted with hoses, clamps, or duct tape).
- Plastic soda bottles (this may be the only evidence of meth labs that use the one pot or shake and bake method).
- Rubber tubing.
- Dust or respiratory masks and filters.
- Funnels.
- Rubber gloves.
- Large plastic storage containers or tubs.
- Containers of multi-layered liquids.
- Coffee filters or other items including bed sheets, used as strainers and stained red.
- White powdery residue.
- Sheets or other coverings on windows.
- Gas cylinders or tanks that may contain anhydrous ammonia.

## *The Risks*

Workers, clients and customers can be exposed to the side effects of the chemicals used to manufacture methamphetamine. Possible routes of exposure to meth lab chemicals include:

- Inhalation.
- Absorption through skin.
- Ingestion (swallowing), contaminated hands, piercing the skin.

People who enter a meth lab before it has been properly cleaned and ventilated may experience headaches, nausea, dizziness, fatigue, shortness of breath, coughing, chest pain, lack of coordination, burns and even death.

Acute exposure can cause severe health problems including lung damage and burns to different parts of the body.

## *What to do*

Whenever any of these signs are present, Workers should:

- Leave the property;
- Advise their manager (or council) of their concerns that the Property may be contaminated and seek advise of the risk of contamination.
- Contractor's identify a local, reputable meth testing specialist;
- Work with that specialist to draw up a set of protocols to follow if a building is suspected of having meth contamination; and
- Train staff on identifying possible meth contamination and the procedures to follow when contamination is suspected. Review this training on a regular basis.
- Distribute the attached Hazard Register and Worksafe document, "Protecting Workers from the Dangers of Clandestine Laboratories" to all workers and ensure they read them and this document.

## FACT SHEET

# PROTECTING WORKERS FROM THE DANGERS OF CLANDESTINE LABORATORIES

This fact sheet gives information for employers on:

- > Risks associated with drug production in clandestine drug laboratories (clan labs).
- > Health effects that can arise from exposure to lab chemicals, by-products or residues.
- > How to identify a clan lab, from signs outside or inside a property.
- > Recommended procedures should a clan lab be discovered or suspected.

### What is a clandestine laboratory?

A clandestine laboratory (clan lab) is any location in which drugs, such as methamphetamine, are illicitly produced. As well as residential and industrial premises, mobile and partial clan labs have been found in vehicles, motels, caravans and campervans. In short, any area with access to a water and electricity supply can be used as a clan lab.

### Should employers be concerned about clan labs?

Under the Health and Safety in Employment Act 1992, employers are responsible for making sure the work being done is safe and healthy. As an employer, you are expected to identify and manage hazards and provide safety information to your staff.

If you are involved in one of these occupations, your workers may come in contact with a clan lab or a former clan lab (this list is not exhaustive):

- > Environmental Health inspection
- > Probation
- > Police
- > Building inspection
- > Noise control
- > Dog control
- > Social work
- > Midwifery
- > Nursing
- > Public health work
- > Commercial cleaners
- > Health and Safety Inspectors
- > Building
- > Plumbing
- > Electrical
- > Painting
- > Meter reading
- > Real estate

*In short, if you, or your, staff visit people's homes or workplaces as part of their work, they should be alert for the presence or former presence of a clan lab.*

Any occupations that involve searching, inspecting and removal of vehicles etc may also be at risk.

## How can clan labs cause your workers harm?

The production of drugs requires the use of chemicals which may be poisonous, corrosive, toxic, extremely flammable and/or explosive.

The risks posed by these chemicals vary. Some are mildly hazardous, others extremely so. Risks can remain high for months after a clan lab stops being used as such.

Significant health risks are posed by toxic, acidic and potentially flammable fumes and waste chemical by-products produced during the 'cooking' process.

The risk of a clan lab fire or explosion is high during a drug 'cook'. Manufacturers of drugs often have limited knowledge of the chemical hazards and little concern for the safety of others.

## What are the health effects of exposure to clan labs?

Both short and long-term health effects can arise from exposure to clan lab chemicals or by-products. These effects are dependent on the concentration, quantity, the route and duration of exposure. Chemicals may enter the body by being inhaled, eaten, injected or absorbed through the skin.

Symptoms of short-term (acute) exposure commonly include:

- > shortness of breath
- > coughing and/or diaphragm pain
- > chest pains
- > anaphylaxis (severe allergic reaction)
- > dizziness
- > lack of co-ordination
- > feeling of coldness or weakness
- > chemical irritation or burns to skin, eyes, nose and mouth (burns may result from concentrated acids and bases used in the manufacture of drugs).

## What about former clan labs?

Unintentional exposure to drugs and the by-products of their manufacture can occur where people are living in, or visit, properties formerly housing a clan lab. Contaminants absorbed by the structure and furnishings can be released for years afterwards.

Resulting symptoms include:

- > headaches
- > nausea
- > dizziness
- > fatigue or lethargy
- > breathing issues.

## Medical Assistance

Should a worker display any or all of these symptoms medical assistance should be sought from their medical practitioner. Severe acute symptoms may require immediate transfer of the worker to hospital.

## HOW CAN YOU IDENTIFY A CLAN LAB?

Locations vary and can include residential properties, apartments, motels, vehicles to name a few. It is important for workers who conduct property visits to be aware of signs that indicate a clan lab may be present.

## External Indicators

Immediately detectable at the time of your visit:

- > Ammonia or solvent smells.
- > Windows blackened out or boarded over.
- > Expensive security and surveillance gear.
- > Rubbish including a lot of cold medication containers or packaging.
- > Chemical containers.
- > Burn pits, stained soil, dead vegetation.
- > Occupants unfriendly, appear secretive about activities.

What others may report:

- > Unusually high water usage, eg: on rural property, refilling of water tanks regularly.
- > Exhaust fans running at odd times.
- > Frequent visitors at odd hours.
- > Unusual behaviour of occupants.
- > Access denied to landlords, neighbours, other visitors.

### Internal Indicators

- > Internal security measures.
- > Laboratory glassware and equipment.
- > Containers with clear liquids in them with a chalky coloured solid on the bottom.
- > Containers with two layered liquids, ie one dark coloured layer and one clear or pale yellow layer.
- > Used coffee filters containing either a white pasty or reddish brown substance.
- > Baking dishes or similar containing white crystalline substance.
- > The presence of hot plates near chemicals.
- > Improvised equipment; eg plastic bottles, pressure cookers.
- > Containers with labels removed.
- > Missing light bulbs.
- > Chemical smells.

### What should you do if you find a clan lab?

If you discover an active or former clan lab:

- > Evacuate the property immediately.
- > Call the police immediately and do not go back inside.
- > Prevent anyone else entering until the Police arrive.

> Do not:

- taste, touch or smell any chemicals or equipment
- attempt to stop a chemical reaction
- turn any electrical device on **or off**, such as lights or a fan, as this could trigger an explosion
- shut off the water supply to the property or the chemical reaction
- smoke in or near a clan lab
- use tools, radios, cell-phones, torches or devices that produce sparks or friction.

### If you are affected by the chemicals present

Seek medical help immediately.

### Further information

Where there is any suspicion of drug manufacture during a property visit, your organisation's property visit policy should be followed. Worker's immediate health and safety are the main priority.

For information on the identification of clandestine laboratories from NZ Police:

<https://www.police.govt.nz/safety/how-to-identify-a-clandestine-drug-lab.pdf>

For information on chemical poisoning contact the Poisons Centre - 0800 POISON (0800 764 766).

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