

How to Spot a Meth Lab



Today, methamphetamine is second only to alcohol and marijuana as the drug used most frequently in many Western and Midwestern states. Seizures of dangerous laboratory materials have increased dramatically—in some states, fivefold – which is precisely why first responders should be extremely careful when responding to a scene. You never know when a routine call could put you in the path of danger.

Meth labs are one of the biggest growing dangers in our country. Because meth is so easy to manufacture, labs are becoming increasingly prevalent, especially in rural areas or small towns.

Firefighters and paramedics are often the first on scene to a meth lab, and don't even realize that they are in grave danger. Proprietors of meth labs often will set fire to their property in order to destroy evidence against them, and booby traps are not uncommon.

Of course, the best and most reliable tool you have at your disposal is common sense—but it's always better to be prepared for what you're up against. The following indicators, photographs and information are intended to assist first responders in staying safe.

WHAT IS METHAMPHETAMINE?

Methamphetamine is a powerful, highly addictive stimulant drug that dramatically affects the central nervous system. It is usually illegally produced and distributed.

Meth comes in several forms, including powder, crystal, rocks, and tablets. When it comes in the crystal form it is called "crystal meth."

Meth is often manufactured or "cooked" in very crude laboratories. Many of these labs are not sophisticated operations and do not require sophisticated chemistry equipment. And the people who cook the meth usually do not have any chemistry training. Cooking meth is relatively simple, but highly dangerous and toxic.

Scenes of meth lab explosions, as pictured to the right, can be extremely dangerous if not handled correctly.



There are two basic categories of meth labs:

Super Labs produce large quantities of meth and supply organized drug trafficking groups that sell the drug in communities across the U.S.



Toxic Labs produce smaller quantities of meth. These “rolling labs” can be set up in homes, motel rooms, inside automobiles, and in parks or rural areas – really almost anywhere.



Meth Laboratory Indicators

The equipment and processes used to produce meth can also reveal the existence of a clandestine methamphetamine laboratory. According to the Drug Enforcement Administration, here are some indicators of a meth lab:

- Propane tanks with fittings that have turned blue.
- Occupants of the residence constantly going outside to smoke.
- Strong smell of urine or unusual chemical smells such as ether, ammonia or acetone.
- An unusual amount of cold tablet containers that list ephedrine or pseudoephedrine as ingredients.
- Jars containing clear liquid with a white or red colored solid on the bottom.
- Jars containing iodine or dark shiny metallic purple crystals inside of jars.
- Jars containing red phosphorus or a fine dark red or purple powder.
- Coffee filters containing a white pasty substance, a dark red sludge, or small amounts of shiny white crystals.

- Bottles containing sulfuric, muriatic or hydrochloric acid.
- Bottles or jars with rubber tubing attached.
- Glass cookware or frying pans containing a powdery residue.
- A large number of cans of camp fuel, paint thinner, acetone, starter fluid, lye, and drain cleaners containing sulfuric acid or bottles containing muriatic acid.
- Large amounts of lithium batteries, especially ones that have been stripped.
- Soft silver or gray metallic ribbon (in chunk form) stored in oil or kerosene.

Many of the above items are found in normal household products, but if they are gathered together in higher than usual amounts, it could indicate meth production activity.



If You Find a Lab (and it has not caught fire)...

Do not touch anything in the lab area and do not sniff any containers. If not on SCBA, back out of the room to protect yourself, and get a respirator or air pack on if you have to go back in the room.

Do not turn any electrical power switches or light switches on or off. Do not open or move any of the containers with chemicals in them. Wait for law enforcement to clear the scene before approaching any patients, because the owner of the meth lab could easily be lying in wait, ready to injure whoever is in his way. Meth users are notoriously dangerous and unstable.

Whatever you do, do not smoke, eat or drink anywhere near a methamphetamine laboratory.

If you come in contact with a meth lab, you should decontaminate yourself and your gear as quickly as possible, wash your hands and face thoroughly, and call your hazardous materials team and the police if you have not already done so.

Cleaning up a clandestine meth lab is a dangerous and complicated process which should be handled by trained professionals. Do not attempt to clean up or dispose of a suspected meth lab yourself if you are first to arrive- you may disrupt the scene, ruin evidence that could convict the owner of the meth lab, or worse, injure yourself and others. Always remember – scene safety is your number 1 priority. You can't rescue others when you become the patient.

“A very good friend of mine who is a deputy sheriff found a bag on the side of the road thinking someone had littered. He was checking the contents for an address when the bag exploded and gave him severe chemical burns.”

Bottom line - leave the evidence collecting to the police and conduct yourself and your team with caution.

