

How to avoid buying a meth house

A home that's contaminated because of methamphetamine production or use may show few visible signs of the risks it poses. And if that weren't bad enough, there's a lot of bad guidance floating around about how to spot one.

By Marilyn Lewis of MSN Real Estate



As the highly addictive drug methamphetamine grows in popularity, so does the chance you could end up buying a "meth house" when you go shopping for real estate.

Making or even smoking meth leaves behind a stew of chemicals that saturates walls, ceilings, floors and carpets with meth as well as mercury, lead, iodine, lithium and poisonous solvents. For each pound of drug, meth "cookers" dump, flush or leave behind 5 to 6 pounds of poisonous waste.

Exposure to even small amounts of these poisons can damage humans' nervous systems, liver and blood production mechanisms. Small children suffer most. Exposure can trigger birth defects and developmental problems in babies in the womb. (Learn about drug-endangered children at [the Office of National Drug Control Policy](#).)

Meth labs are found in houses, commercial buildings, cabins, mobile homes, RVs, caves, abandoned mines and federal and state forests and parks. The stuff is so easy to make and the ingredients are so cheap and common that some users just make their own at home in two-liter pop bottles or a picnic cooler.

If you accidentally buy a meth house, your health isn't the only thing at stake. You could get stuck with tens of thousands of dollars in costs for testing and hazardous-materials cleanup.

That is what happened to Dawn Turner's son and his young family when they unwittingly bought a meth house in a rural area in Tennessee in 2004. It wasn't until 2006, when they decided to sell the house, that they learned from neighbors that the previous owner of their home was in prison for making and using meth there. The cost of testing, decontaminating and re-testing the house: \$16,000. The experience devastated the young couple, emotionally and financially, says Turner, who began a Web site, [MethLabHomes.com](#), that's a repository of news and resources to help keep others from making the same mistake.



Many homeowners she talks with are wiped out financially by these contaminated homes, Turner says.

Sorting fact from fiction

A home contaminated by meth production has few visible signs. Buyers need help identifying the risks, yet bad information abounds. Here are some common myths about meth houses:

Myth No. 1: You can use hair spray or spray starch to find meth residue.

Fact: Hair spray? Not a chance. There is a bit of truth that starch, sprayed on a contaminated surface, will turn purple-red. Starch turns color in the presence of iodine, used in cooking meth. "It's a pretty common high-school science project," says Caoimhin P. Connell, an industrial hygienist who's an expert in detecting methamphetamine with [Forensic Applications Consulting Technology](#) in Bailey, Colo. The spray-starch trick caught on after it was featured in an episode of "CSI." It can work, but it's not reliable or sensitive, so if you don't see purple, you can't conclude that a house is clean.

Myth No. 2: You can tell by the smell.

Fact: An old, out-of-use method of meth manufacture does produce a nasty odor that's reminiscent of cat urine. Even current methods – at certain stages – produce various odors. But none of these is a reliable tip-off. In fact, most meth-contaminated homes have no odor or visual clues.

Mike Parker, a landlord in Trinidad, Colo., spent two years and \$40,000 to test and clean up one of his 21 apartments after police arrested a tenant with meth supplies four years ago. The apartment was sealed for two years while Parker tried to borrow enough money for the job. His insurance policy didn't cover it. "They literally go in and tear everything out," Parker says of the cleanup by a hazardous-waste company. "I had to recarpet, put in a new toilet, new appliances, new fixtures. They took out the stove, refrigerator, everything."

And yet, Parker had been in the apartment the day of the bust and he smelled nothing -- no tell-tale odors whatsoever. Despite all his trouble, he says he feels somewhat lucky: Had all 21 apartments shared a heating system, the entire building would have been affected.

Parker vouches for the fact that meth labs are easy to conceal. Usually they go undiscovered until a landlord finds a mess when tenants depart or a neighbor phones police to report someone's weird behavior. "We presume that for every meth lab law enforcement discovers, there are 15 that have not been discovered," Connell says.

Myth No. 3: No problem, they were only smoking it.

Fact: Many people don't realize that smoking meth just once leaves a home uninhabitable, Connell says. Some newer methods of manufacture create less contamination, but smoking "will result in contamination 100% of the time," Connell says.

Myth No. 4: You're safe in high-end neighborhoods.

Fact: Plenty of labs have been discovered in expensive homes in "nice" neighborhoods. "We have processed meth labs in the homes of two different dentists, a public accountant and an international banker who had a legitimate

income of seven figures," Connell says. He recently tested and found meth in a "beautiful," 4,500-square-foot, million-dollar house in downtown Denver.

In 2009, the Drug Enforcement Administration reported clandestine meth labs in 46 states. (Click your state on [this DEA map](#).) Certain areas become hot spots. Lately, Oklahoma, Arkansas and Missouri are a center for labs. One reason: Midwest farmers use tons of anhydrous-ammonia fertilizer on crops. It's a "precursor" (ingredient) for meth and is stored in big tanks in and around farms. Thieves help themselves and a manufacturing industry grows up around the supply.

Screening purchases

No one is suggesting that every home purchase should be treated as a potential meth lab. But there are some tip-offs that tell you to investigate further. Unfortunately, many clues -- squalid living conditions, graffiti, strange visitors coming and going at night -- aren't available to a buyer. However, you can screen for the most obvious red flags:

- **Foreclosures:** Plenty of meth labs get used, trashed and abandoned. They end up in foreclosure and then are recycled onto the market. Scrutinize foreclosure purchases carefully, Connell says.
- **Houses:** A disproportionate number of labs show up in single-family homes compared with apartments and condominiums, Connell says.
- **Police trouble:** A house that has a history of arrests or police visits is more likely to have a meth history. Here are tips to learning a home's history:

Chat with neighbors. Knock on doors in the neighborhood. Introduce yourself, say that you're considering buying the house down the block and that you're researching its history. Find longtime residents whose memory stretches back awhile. Ask if police have been called to the house or if arrests or busts were made there.

Call the police. Phone or visit the police department's community-service office and ask them to check the address of the home you're considering for arrests, drug busts and other problems.

Call the health department. Find out if the address you're considering is listed in connection with any health department reports.

Professional testing

The only way to guarantee the home you're buying isn't contaminated is testing by an industrial hygienist specializing in drug-residue detection. "By walking into a property, I can tell you, based on the structure, other properties around it, where the light switches are, which way the wind blows, where to collect the sample that tells if meth is present," Connell says. Samples are sent to a lab for analysis. A cursory evaluation can cost around \$450; exhaustive testing starts at \$2,000 or more.

Amateur testing

A decent (but not fail-safe) screening can be done with a good test kit. Cost: \$9 to \$35. A positive reading shows that a place has a problem. But a negative reading doesn't mean the home is clean. Amateur testers can easily miss "dirty" areas. Increase your chances by using seven or eight kits in a home you're serious about, wiping many different locations -- counters, ceiling, floor and walls in different rooms. Tests can be purchased over the Internet but vary in quality. Connell recommends [SKC Methchek](#) (in which he has no financial interest), which uses

a method developed by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health that lets you see results instantly. Cost: three tests for \$109; discounts for volume purchases.

To protect yourself, it also helps to do these things:

Learn your state's protections.

Some states give buyers more protection than others, both in terms of how much information a seller must disclose about a property and in terms of acceptable standards for cleaning up a drug-contaminated site.

Most states require sellers to disclose certain known problems, such as structural defects. In addition, some states also make sellers disclose that they're not aware of environmental hazards such as asbestos or lead. A few states go even further. Colorado, for example, now requires sellers to certify in a real-estate contract that a property was never used as a meth lab. A buyer can get a house tested and can back out of a deal if a meth history is revealed. Once a house has been decontaminated to Colorado's standards, though, sellers no longer need to disclose the history.

Disclosures matter because, in most jurisdictions, if property that you own turns out to be contaminated, you must pay the cost of testing and cleaning it up, whether or not you were aware of the home's history. Increasingly, communities and states are setting strict standards for cleanup. (See the Environmental Protection Agency's [Voluntary Guidelines for Methamphetamine Laboratory Cleanup](#).)

When you're buying property:

- **Learn what to expect from disclosures.** [Read: "Disclosure: What sellers need to know."](#) Ask a good real-estate agent to explain exactly what sellers must disclose in your state. Look up your state's real-estate laws and learn how to contact regulators at [the Association of Real Estate License Law Officials' Web site](#).
- **Accompany the home inspector.** Even if you don't suspect problems, try to be on-site during the pre-purchase inspection of a home you want to buy. You'll learn much more by watching the inspection and asking questions than you will by simply reading the inspection report. Don't expect a home inspector to be able to identify meth contamination. However, some inspectors have taken training that lets them point to suspicious signs.
- **Use your own smarts.** Look for unusual problems such as yellow staining on carpets and walls, and corroded plumbing and electrical wiring. The Nevada Attorney General's Web site lists more [ways to recognize a meth house here](#).