

## Meth Safe Homes

New Zealand leads the world in meth usage and 70% of the meth consumed in New Zealand is made here. Of the meth labs Police find 75% (2009 figures) are found in rental properties.

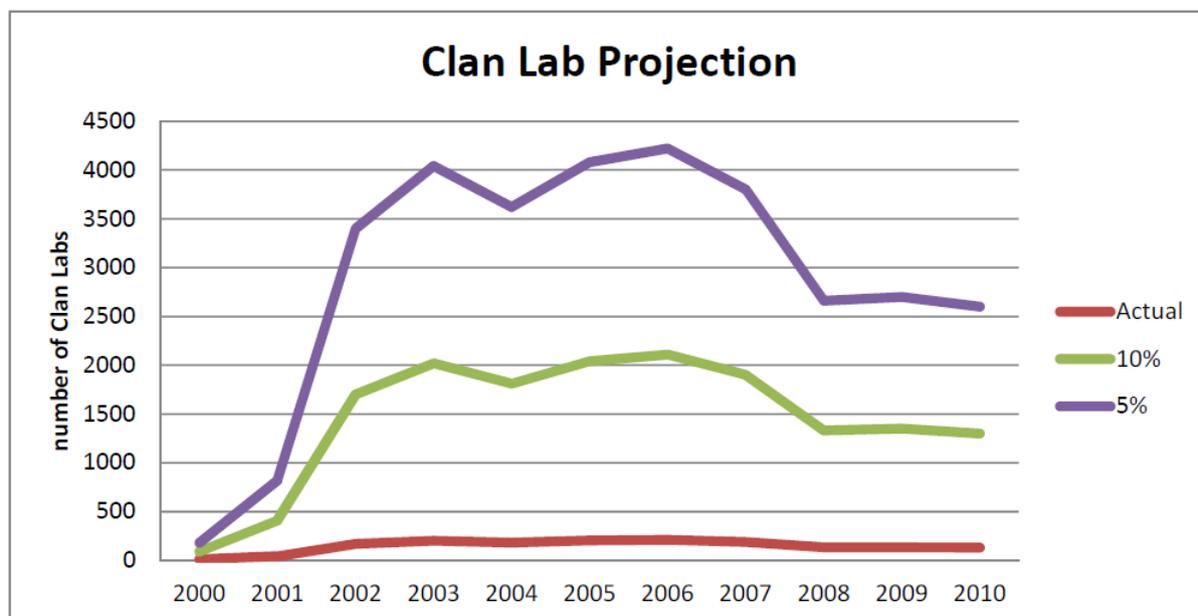
In the last 10 years, the average number of meth labs found by Police is 160. Estimates place this as being between 5% and 10% of the number in operation at any one time. On these figures, and assuming these meth labs stay in one place, in the last 10 years, as many as 32,000 locations will have been contaminated by the toxic chemicals that are associated with meth being 'cooked'.

Owning and living in these properties is both bad for your health and your wallet.

### Why is a meth contaminated property bad for your health?

Some of the chemicals used to manufacture meth, the gases that penetrate the fabric of a building and the chemicals that are poured down drains and into gardens are highly toxic.

The cooking process itself produces new organic chemicals (those typically associated with cancer) that are poorly understood by scientists. The long term effect of these chemicals will only be known once the people exposed to them start to evidence unusual health effects.



However, most meth labs in New Zealand are small and highly mobile. They literally move around. One meth 'cook' and their 'lab' have the potential to contaminate tens if not hundreds of locations in any given year.

Hotels, motels, holiday parks, baches, even cars are all used as places in which to cook meth. It is investment property though which tops the 'busted' meth lab statistics.

The precise number of properties contaminated by meth and meth cooking residues is unknown. It is an illegal act that attracts a decent jail sentence so it is typically not something which is advertised.

What is known is that there are thousands of properties and locations around New Zealand that have been used as meth labs.

Short term, acute health effects, can be asthma like symptoms, breathing difficulties, skin rashes, eye irritations, head-aches and nausea. As some people are more sensitive than others, one member of a family may be entirely unaffected while another suffers horrendous skin rashes.

Long term health effects can include chronic fatigue, diseases of the central nervous system, circulatory system, strokes and cancer.

## What health indicator should you look out for?

Many of the physical symptoms associated with meth lab poisoning can come across as being a worsening of an existing condition.

When it comes to getting answers to concerns in regard to the effect your property may be having on your health, it is important to be aware that the medical profession is trained to identify symptoms and from there work out likely cause. This means that it can often take a long time before the link between health effects and your living environment is considered. Indeed, there are some within the medical profession who are keen to see the standard approach adjusted to better identify the role environmental factors may have on health effects.

For people who have recently moved into a new home and feel they may be suffering from some of the health effects noted above, it is important to make a candid assessment as to whether your living environment is affecting your health. Ask yourself the following questions:

- How does your health compare to before you moved into your new home?
- When have you previously suffered from the health issues that are causing you concern?
- How often do you suffer from seasonal health effects such as hay fever and other allergic reactions?
- To what extent are these allergy triggers present in your new living environment?
- What happens to these symptoms when you go away from the property?

Where methamphetamine contamination is present in the building, either as a result of cooking or heavy usage, then you may suffer from a mild 'meth' effect. The symptoms of this can include:

- Sleeplessness
- Paranoia
- Anxiety
- Depression

Again, some of these symptoms could be related to other things. So, candidly assess the symptoms you are experiencing against the questions above.

If your candid answers to these questions lead you to believe that your living environment may be influencing your health, then you must raise this with your doctor. Police enter a meth lab wearing the civilian equivalent of a chemical warfare suit for very good reason!



**Fig 2. Lab officers getting hosed down by the fire brigade.**

Getting to the bottom of whether or not your environment is affecting your health is likely to require toxicology tests. This may include blood tests although hair testing will show a much longer history of exposure. This is particularly true of methamphetamine, which clears out of the body very quickly.

### Why is meth contaminated property bad for your wallet

The financial consequences of owning or buying a former meth lab may be crippling.

Figure 3 sets out an estimate of costs; known and unknown, which are likely to be associated with rehabilitation of a meth contaminated property. These figures are conservative. In a worst case scenario, a property may need to be destroyed.

*HOBANZ Member Case study – we have one member who bought a property in the Bay of Plenty who knows only too well the consequences of buying a meth lab contaminated property.*

*The house they bought was known by the Council to have been a former meth lab. Unfortunately they only found this out after they had bought the property. And, this only came to light as they were an employee of the Council at the time. When the matter was raised with Council, the advice they gave was to sell the property.*

*As the position regarding provision of information to prospective purchasers of property is somewhat grey, this was perhaps good logical advice. From a moral and ethical standpoint, it is reprehensible. The member chose not to take this advice and decided to decontaminate the property. The cost to them has been enormous. They now have cancer which has been linked to chemical exposure they have suffered and they are \$200,000 worse off.*

As the response of insurance companies to claims for clean up of meth labs is uncertain, it is advisable to closely check the policy wording. Where cover is provided, unless the property burns down, cover is typically capped at between \$25 to 50,000. These limits of cover need to be considered in light of the likely costs shown in Figure 3 below.

<b>Testing</b>	\$2,500 to 3,000
<b>Decontamination</b>	\$10,000 to \$50,000
<b>Fit out</b>	\$5,000 to \$20,000
<b>Retesting</b>	\$1,000 to \$3,000
<b>Loss of Rents</b>	\$?,000
<b>Loss of Value of Property</b>	\$??,000
<b>Reaction of banks</b>	\$??,000
<b>Future Liability</b>	\$???,000
<b>Health</b>	\$???,000

## What to do if you believe that your home has been used as a meth lab?

Meth labs are not good for homes and they are not good for communities. So, HOBANZ is planning to follow developments in this area closely, providing support and applying pressure where we can. We have established connections with representatives from the Auckland Regional Meth Working Group (ARMWG). It is likely that this working group will act as a template for other work conducted around the country. We will be providing the home owner's perspective on this issue, in an effort to ensure our views are well represented.

So, in terms of what you should do if you believe your home has been used as a former meth lab, we recommend the following:

- Do the health check list and if you still feel the same way, see a Doctor and push for a toxicology test – it is far better to be safe than sorry.
- If toxins are present in your body, then your medical advisor must report this to the Medical Officer of Health (MOH), who is employed by the relevant District Health Board. Under Department of Health Guidelines, it is the MOH who has responsibility for investigating the poisoning.
- Inform your insurance company and find somewhere else to stay.
- Begin the process of getting your house back to a habitable state!

## Things that you can do to reduce the risk of a property you buy being a former meth lab

The consequences associated with buying a meth contaminated property are so dire, that we believe that just like 'leaky building' issues, the risk needs careful consideration when buying property.

There are a number of practical things which can be done to reduce the risk that the home you buy and investment you make in property is not undermined by meth contamination. These include:

- Find out if the property has been used as a rental – if it has, the risk just got higher.
- Ask the vendor/real estate agent about the property's history – specifically ask about meth.
- Ask if the property has been monitored for meth manufacture – MethMinder is a Kiwi developed device that does this – if it has been monitored and there were no alarms indicating meth being cooked then the risk is reduced.

Get the property tested. Contact Methsolutions on 08006384522 or view their website at [www.methsolutions.co.nz](http://www.methsolutions.co.nz)