



Public Health Risks of Residues from Smoking Methylamphetamine in Homes

Department of Health Position

Although surface residues from smoking of methylamphetamine in residential properties generally represent a relatively low public health risk, the large number of people potentially exposed warrants specific and proportionate contamination management measures.

Purpose

This document outlines the Western Australian Department of Health's (WA Health) position on the nature and management of risks from methylamphetamine smoking residues in homes.

Issue

Contamination associated with criminal manufacture of illicit drugs in clandestine drug laboratories (clan labs) has long been recognised as a significant risk to occupants of properties where the activity occurred and is normally subject to rigorous remediation procedures.

In recent years it has also been realised that surface residue remains in properties where illicit drugs, in particular methylamphetamine (meth), are smoked. These properties generally have lower measured levels of the active drug and are without other clan lab associated risks; however, they may be 50-100 times more common than clan labs.

Since it is usually difficult to determine whether the source of meth surface residue is smoking or manufacture, unless a clan lab is formally notified, any identification of surface residue has normally been treated with the rigorous remediation procedures associated with a lab.

WA Health has [investigated](#) whether the level of public risks from meth smoke residues differs from those arising from meth manufacture and whether different and perhaps moderated remediation procedures may be warranted.

WA Health is also working with other agencies to put measures in place to reduce opportunities for meth smoking in homes, including early identification and resulting management as part of routine property inspections.

Level of risk

The WA Health research, and other studies, have found that properties containing surface residues from meth smoking in Australia and New Zealand have average surface contamination levels of around $2.7 \mu\text{g}/100\text{cm}^2$ (the Health Investigation Level (HIL) is $0.5 \mu\text{g}/100\text{cm}^2$), with 'hotspots' in areas of heavy use that may reach $10\text{-}15 \mu\text{g}/100\text{cm}^2$ and higher on rare occasions.

Meth manufacture normally generates much greater levels of meth contamination than those for smoking and can include a range of other hazardous manufacture-related residues such as solvents and metals that are absent in smoke houses.

Based on the typical levels of contamination from meth smoking and a risk assessment process, WA Health has determined that the associated residues generally represent a low potential for significant public health impacts. However, given the relatively higher numbers of homes where meth is used,

compared with homes where meth is manufactured, there is a much larger number of potentially exposed people, including vulnerable individuals, such as infants and toddlers.

Contamination management

Given the above and that typical meth smoking residue levels substantially exceed the HIL, WA Health recommends, as a precautionary approach, a proper assessment of any property where past or current meth-related activity is suspected. Where surface residue is found, it should be characterised and then cleaned up in manner that considers the level and location of contamination.

Currently, WA Health provides contamination management guidance for both [clan labs](#) and, separately, for [drug smoking](#), including meth, for illicit drug service providers accredited by WA Health. Separate WA Health [guidance material for property owners, occupants and agents](#) may be of particular interest for these named groups.

WA Health is working on more detailed guidance which will address all forms of illicit drug contamination of residential properties. These guidelines are likely to be released in 2023, and will be available from the WA Health [illicit drug contamination website](#). The guidelines will result in properly protective but more cost-effective management processes, and be accompanied by additional stakeholder specific guidance material, such for as Local Government Authorities.

Key principles underlying the guidelines are:

- For any property where meth-related activity is known or reasonably suspected, undertaking screening sampling in occupied spaces to identify residues,
- Assuming, in the absence of any reasonable suspicion or other evidence, that identified meth surface residues result from smoking the drug, rather than manufacture,
- Characterising any meth residue through quantitative sampling designed to determine the level and distribution across impacted areas,
- Based on these results, undertaking remediation in areas proven or properly inferred to be contaminated in a manner suitable for the identified situation. For meth smoke residues, remediation may often be done on a surface or area specific basis, and allow for the retention of some personal effects and household goods after simple remedial measures, such as wiping, laundering, or professional steam cleaning, and
- Validating the effectiveness of the cleaning and suitability for habitation by further targeted sampling.

Using Service Providers

WA Health strongly recommends the use of its vetted and approved [service providers](#), in particular testing and cleaning companies. Although other companies may be used, there is the risk that they may not follow government recommended procedures and in doing so may provide misleading information or over-servicing such as by treating homes with surface residue resulting from meth smoking as if it was a clan lab.

In obtaining professional assistance for any illicit drug contamination work it is important to:

- Get more than one quote for a similar scope of work, noting that further costs are likely where initial work identifies contamination at a level that prompts follow-on activities,
- Avoid the situation where a testing company proposes to undertake any recommended remediation, as this is a conflict of interest,
- Check that the company undertaking the work will be following WA Health guidance material and has adequate experience, training and supporting testimonials, and
- Ensure the company has professional indemnity insurance and public liability insurance, and fully explains, justifies and documents the work that is being undertaken.

For problems with service providers or contamination issues, WA Health may be approached for technical and public health risk-related advice, and Consumer Protection can assist with cases of improper business conduct.

Conclusion

Most property illicit drug health risks result from smoking meth or being present while others are smoking (secondary smoke). While surface smoke residue usually presents a relatively low risk to occupants, proper assessment and remediation specific to that type of contamination is recommended. WA Health strongly recommends that service providers vetted by it undertake such work. However, in any case, the person commissioning a service should try to ensure that it is based on the WA Health guidance material and so undertaken in a protective and cost-effective manner.

Further information

Department of Health

Phone: 08 9222 2000, Email: DOH.ChemicalHazards@wa.gov.au

Webpage: [Illicit drug contamination \(health.wa.gov.au\)](http://health.wa.gov.au)

Consumer Protection

Phone: 1300 30 40 54, Email: consumer@dmirs.wa.gov.au

Webpage: [Illegal drug activity homes](http://health.wa.gov.au)

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