

## Article

# PURCHASING PROPERTY - DO I NEED A METH TEST?

The contamination of houses by the manufacture or smoking of methamphetamine (commonly known as “Meth” or “P”) is a growing issue in New Zealand. Meth is highly toxic and can have a lasting, damaging effect on a property. The problem is most prevalent in properties that have been used for rental purposes. Buyers therefore need to be increasingly cautious as there can be serious financial consequences of purchasing a property that has been contaminated by Meth.

### Why is this a problem?

Methamphetamine is a crystal that vaporises when heated. The vapour produced contains highly poisonous chemicals that are absorbed by the surfaces and structural features of a property such as carpets, curtains, furniture and walls. These chemicals are harmful to those who come in to contact with them and can cause serious health issues including dizziness, nausea, fatigue, headaches and trouble breathing.

Once Meth has been absorbed into a property, it can be very difficult and costly to remove it. The most effective way is to strip out all of the materials and structures that have absorbed it. Depending on the level of contamination, the costs of doing this can be in the tens of thousands. In the most severe cases, the damage may be irreparable and the only option is to demolish the property. Unless specific cover for meth-related damage is in place, the cost of any remedial or replacement works will often not be covered by insurance.

### What can you do?

Meth contamination does not leave an odour and is not visible to the naked eye. A simple inspection of the property is therefore unlikely to reveal whether there is any contamination. However, there are a number of things that buyers can do to reduce their risk of buying a contaminated property:

Check the history of the property. Statistically it is more likely that the property will be contaminated if it is or has previously been used as a rental.

Speak to the neighbours. They can often provide further information about the people who have previously lived in the property and whether there is a history of unusual activity, for example frequent police visits or people coming and going at strange times of the day.

Check if there are any physical signs that may suggest a use of Meth at the property. For example staining or discolouration on the ceilings and/or work surfaces, the installation of high-tech security devices, excessive or high fencing or the presence of additional ventilation systems that would be unusual for a normal residential home.

Get a LIM (Land Information Memorandum) Report for the property. If a property has been tested and identified as having had past contamination, then Council must record this on the LIM. However, this will only relate to properties where the contamination is known about and has formally been processed by the police.

Make the Sale & Purchase Agreement conditional upon a satisfactory Meth test being obtained. Although the actions set out above can be useful in indicating whether there may be a risk of contamination, the only way to be certain is to have the property formally tested for Meth.

There are currently a number of companies who carry out Meth testing, and a wide variety of testing methods that can be used. These range from laboratory testing using professional test kits to simple at-home test kits that buyers use themselves and can be purchased online.

Initial low-cost tests can provide a yes/no answer as to whether Meth residue is present at a property. If the answer is yes, more comprehensive testing can be carried out to determine how prevalent the Meth is and whether it is present at dangerous levels. The cost of an initial indicator test kit can start at \$100. More invasive testing can cost upwards of \$1,000 depending on the size of the property.



## **Current issues with Methamphetamine testing**

There is currently no national standard in place for determining “safe” Meth levels, and no regulatory controls governing the testing process. The quality and reliability of testing carried out by building inspectors and specialist companies can therefore differ wildly. To combat this, the government has set up a working party to establish a set of protocols and regulation in this area. This is expected to include guidance on testing properties for contamination, methods of assessing risks to health from contaminated materials and best practice procedures for decontamination and remediation of properties. Until such protocols have been established however, buyers should exercise caution when instructing a particular building inspector or company, and deciding what types of testing to undertake.

## **Conclusion**

Unfortunately, the problem of Meth contamination will continue to be an issue when purchasing a property in today’s environment. Buyers need to be aware of the potential risks, particularly when the property has previously been used as a rental. Appropriate enquiries should be made before the contract is signed and, if in doubt, a Meth test should be carried out by a suitably qualified inspector or specialist company.

If you are thinking about purchasing a property and would like further advice regarding the issue of Meth contamination, or the types of testing that can be carried out, please contact a member of our Property & Development Team on (07) 578 2099.

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