Contamination from meth labs linked to illnesses
Researchers cite respiratory, neurological problems in children

Written by Jess Rollins

Few studies have been conducted on contamination caused by meth manufacturing or the potential health effects of living in a space where meth was made.

Some expert researchers, however, linked meth houses to respiratory, even neurological problems, in children.

Research conducted by Mike Van Dyke, and his colleagues at National Jewish Health in Denver, Colo., reveals very high levels of toxic chemicals are produced during meth cooking and hazardous chemical exposures can persist in rooms and buildings for an extended period of time.

“I can’t tell you, definitively, people living in a meth house are going to have health problems,” Van Dyke told the News-Leader.

“But what I can say, from what we’ve measured, is we can expect health problems.”

In the study, agents with the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration conducted controlled methamphetamine “cooks” while Van Dyke and others measured the chemicals being released.

The research started as an attempt to measure dangers posed to first responders — which are numerous — but as data was being collected, researchers began to look at potential chemical exposure to others.

Specifically, Van Dyke said, researchers reviewed several reports of families unknowingly moving into a building that had been used as a meth lab. The families only discovered the home had been used as a lab after significant lung problems were diagnosed in the children.

Not only are chemicals dispersed during meth production, Van Dyke said, but meth itself becomes airborne during cooking and can contaminate an entire house.
Van Dyke described a young child crawling on carpet, touching walls and other surfaces. Then, the child puts a hand in his or her mouth and gets a dose of the drug.

Typically, according to reported instances, residents complain of respiratory problems, scratchy throats and other irritations, Van Dyke said.

There have also been some reports of neurological problems in children.

“You’d expect that if they are being exposed to meth,” he said.

“It’s a drug. It is designed to react with the body in a certain way, that’s why people take it.”

Van Dyke said little research has been done on long-term health effects of living in a meth house.

“It’s a really hard population to study. You don’t get a lot of volunteers,” Van Dyke said. Subjects might fear getting in trouble or losing home value if they are outspoken about the issue.

Of the data that is available, Van Dyke said: “I just don’t think it is sufficient to draw a big conclusion, but there is enough to conclude it’s not a good situation.”

Van Dyke said more research should be done to investigate potential health problems involved with meth labs but, recently, the urgency has lessened.

“Except in Missouri and Tennessee, the meth issue has settled down. We don’t see as many labs as we have in a while.”