

Officers: Protect Yourself before the Raid

Arguably, aside from the routine dangers faced by police officers daily, two of the most dangerous situations that law enforcement officers face today are terrorist actions and clandestine drug labs.

What's "out there" can hurt you

Illegal clandestine meth labs are a deadly business. This process of combining multiple chemicals creates hazardous conditions, including fire, explosions, and airborne toxic gases, besides considerable hazardous chemical waste, all of which pose a threat to both law enforcement and the public.

Potential hazards of drug labs start with facing the perpetrators themselves, but are heightened considerably by the chemical soup of the nasty environments they create. Even careless assemblage of household chemicals in their original state signifies a potentially unpredictable and volatile mix that no one should approach without first protecting themselves. Failure to protect yourself before entering a drug lab could lead to lifelong health problems and even death.

Some common chemicals used are: acetone, toluene, methanol methyl alcohol, denatured alcohol, ether, anhydrous ammonia, lithium, red phosphorous, iodine or iodine crystals, muriatic acid, sulfuric acid, lye, hydrochloric acid, and hypophosphorous acid.

Interrupting lab activities during manufacture increases officers' risk of encountering chemicals such as hydrochloric and phosphine gases, which can cause immediate and irreversible damage to human tissues. Unfortunately, such encounters happen every day.

One more factor that increases danger is surely no surprise to any seasoned officer: the mental and emotional states of the lab operators themselves. They are no rocket scientists, although their environment might be safer if they were!

Preoccupied with making money, producing their end product as quickly as possible, and possibly high on drugs themselves, they pay little attention to the side effects of their cook. Their children, neighbors, associates, and any unwelcome law enforcement team can easily be unwitting victims of their own carelessness, stupidity, and greed.

Personal safety is not on the lab operator's agenda, but it **MUST** be the top priority for all officers approaching the scene.

The issue of Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) for Law Enforcement

Historically, police officers have not required the use of PPE other than wearing gas masks during civil disturbances or when using tear gas to dislodge a suspect from a building. For civil disturbances, for example, you just donned face masks and riot helmets. However, today's new, more plentiful, and more hazardous encounters have expanded your roles so that law enforcement officers are far more likely than fire service or HazMat teams to be first on the scene.

Various hazardous environments call for various degrees of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). These days, officers have to protect themselves for the unknown, approach the scene and determine what the hazards are, then adjust their equipment needs to suit the hazards. This means that you need to understand the hazards better, as well as the degree and type of protection offered by different respirators and other PPE.

PPE is not simply a matter of grabbing a respirator and rushing to the scene. An effective respiratory protection program requires proper selection, fit-testing, training, and maintenance—procedures that should be assimilated into your organization's SOP.

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Effective response to drug labs and other dangers is much more likely if you are familiar with your PPE and how it works for you. Then, you can protect yourself properly and concentrate on doing your job.

What types of PPE you need

Drug labs typically encompass a wide range of potential dangers that demand a number of different types of personal protection and tools. Categories include atmospheric (gas) detectors, SCBA (self-contained breathing apparatus), air-purifying respirators (gas masks) with multiple-gas cartridges, head protection, eyewear and face shields, communication systems, fall protection and rescue devices, ballistic protection, lighting devices, clothing, gloves, boots, and first aid.

Before using PPE, wearers **MUST** be trained in its use and understand it enough to answer questions like: “Is this product appropriate for this use? What are its limitations? What will it do for me—for how long?”

Step One **BEFORE** approaching any lab is to suit up and don air-supplied respiratory protection. Arm yourself with a handheld gas-detecting instrument that can help you determine just what you’re getting into. After the gas detector identifies the airborne hazards present (such as lack of oxygen, or ammonia and phosphine gases), you reassess your PPE needs. For example, an air-purifying respirator with multiple-gas cartridges may be sufficient protection for the immediate situation.

PPE needs inside and around drug labs range from heavy-duty to light protection depending on the hazards, and only testing the atmosphere(s) can guide you to the correct choices of PPE.

How to prepare

It’s a good idea to have a designated PPE expert in your organization, who is responsible for the coordination of information, training, and other activities related to PPE for homeland security, drug labs, chemical spills, and other potential situations. Much of what you must learn in preparation for terrorist activities also prepares you for dealing effectively with drug lab encounters. A good deal of your time will be spent on understanding respiratory protection and how to choose the correct types for various hazards, how to fit-test, and other elements of an OSHA-required respiratory protection program.

These topics include (but are not limited to):

- Information about potential hazards
- Types of PPE and how to select, use, and care for it
- What is meant by “the highest level of protection”
- Government standards that are related to these hazards and the appropriate PPE that you should wear, such as NIOSH-certified respiratory protection
- How to find funding to pay for it and where to buy it
- Who to enlist for specialized training, procedures, and services
- The role of interoperability with other law enforcement groups
- The need for geographic interaction with other first responders (fire service, emergency medical service, independent security forces, hospitals, etc.)
- Participation in programs of awareness, training, and emergency drills
- How to train and educate the force
- Training exercises while wearing PPE to accustom officers on how to perform their duties while wearing PPE

Where to get assistance

Manufacturers of industrial safety gear and instrumentation are aware of the new PPE needs of law enforcement. They and their distributors are good sources of information and assistance in choosing the correct PPE for drug lab encounters.

MSA is a safety products and instrument manufacturer that has protected the protectors since 1914. Besides a complete range of PPE to outfit you during dangerous encounters, MSA can provide solutions, on-site and online training, technical expertise, educational literature, and help from local distributors. MSA’s manager of homeland security is Ernie Batista, a retired DEA Special Agent whose firsthand experience qualifies him as an expert in your field. MSA’s experts have assisted entire cities and states in all aspects of acquiring and using appropriate respiratory protection.

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Call MSA's customer service at 1-888-0018 and ask for help, starting with two educational bulletins: "Key Elements of a Sound Respiratory Protection Program" and "PPE Primer for Law Enforcement."

Ironically, at a time when law enforcement must be more aware and better trained for any imaginable incident, you are also required to understand a new way of protecting yourself. But investment in the necessary training time and appropriate safety gear will make you much better equipped to do your job when you come face to face with hazards that threaten your safety and health, and that of the public.

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NOTE: The information contained within this article is intended as a general introduction and must not be construed as complete instructions for responding to clandestine drug labs or other hazardous environments. Be sure to consult with a qualified expert before responding to such environments.