



Managing Asbestos in your workplace

Asbestos is a soft mineral rock consisting of tiny fibres that can be released into the air when cut, damaged or deteriorated. Breathing in air containing asbestos fibres can lead to serious illness, such as cancer of the lungs and chest - there is no cure for asbestos related disease - and all forms of asbestos can be dangerous.

Although it is now illegal to use asbestos in the construction and refurbishment of any premises, many thousands of tonnes of it were used in the past and much of it is still in place - it is most likely to be present in buildings constructed or refurbished before 1985.

Anyone who uses your premises and who disturbs asbestos will be at risk, for example, electricians, plumbers, maintenance workers, joiners, and maybe even cleaners. There is no safe level; it is now thought that repeated low exposures, such as those which occur during routine repair work, may lead to cancers.

The simple steps below will help you to manage the risk from materials containing asbestos.



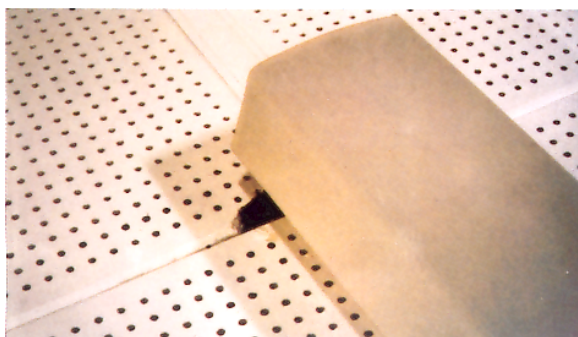
STEP 1 FIND OUT IF ASBESTOS IS PRESENT

- Look at building plans and other relevant information such as builder's invoices which may tell you if and where asbestos materials have been used in the construction or refurbishment of the building. Think about boiler and pipe lagging, ceiling and floor tiles, fire resisting materials, insulating board, cement rooves, gutters, textured coatings, etc.
- Consult others, such as surveyors, architects, or contractors who know the building.
- Carry out a thorough inspection of the building both inside and out, to identify materials that are or may be asbestos. Alternatively you can use an independent expert.

REMEMBER - IF IN DOUBT PRESUME THAT A MATERIAL CONTAINS ASBESTOS.

STEP 2 DETERMINE THE CONDITION

- Is the surface of the material damaged, frayed or scratched?
- Are the surface sealants peeling or breaking off?
- Is the material becoming detached from its base?
- Are protective coverings, designed to protect the material, missing or damaged?
- Is there asbestos dust or debris near the material?



STEP 3 RECORD WHERE THE ASBESTOS OR PRESUMED ASBESTOS IS AND ITS CONDITION

- Prepare a drawing or other record which shows where the asbestos or presumed asbestos is, its type (if known) and its condition.

STEP 4 ASSESS THE POTENTIAL RISK FROM THE ASBESTOS CONTAINING MATERIAL (ACM)

Assess whether the ACM's are being, or are likely to be, disturbed. To do this you will need to consider the following.

- Is the ACM in a position where it is likely to be disturbed?
 - Do people work near it?
 - Is there easy access to it?
- Would normal use of the premises create a risk of damage e.g. the use or movement of equipment, cleaning operations etc?
- How much ACM is present?
- How many people use the area where the ACM is?
- Is the ACM likely to be subject to maintenance / refurbishment work?

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STEP 5 DECIDE WHAT TO DO

What to do will depend on the condition and type of the material, for example:

a) For material in good condition, not likely to be damaged and not likely to be disturbed - it is probably safest to leave the material in place and to introduce a proactive management system. For such a system to be effective the owner/occupier of the premises must be in a position to exercise control over access to the material by workers, contractors, etc. and must do so.

b) Materials in poor condition or likely to be damaged or disturbed, should either be repaired, effectively sealed, enclosed or removed. Some materials containing asbestos must only be removed by a licensed contractor, e.g. pipe lagging, insulating board, etc. Get advice from the Health & Safety Executive for Northern Ireland, 02890 243249 or from your local council Environmental Health Department.

STEP 6 PREPARE A MANAGEMENT PLAN

If you decide to leave materials in place.

- Make a note of where they are on your drawing.
- Keep this information up to date.
- Establish a register of the location and condition of the materials.
- Nominate a person to control access to the materials.
- Consider labelling the material with an asbestos warning sign.
- Devise a system to ensure that workers or contractors involved in maintenance or refurbishment work are informed of exactly where the materials containing asbestos are located.

Case Study

Contractors removing a partition wall did not know that the void between the inner and outer walls was filled with loose asbestos insulation material. The walls were removed and carried, unwrapped, from the fifth floor of the building to a skip at the ground floor entrance. By the time anyone realised that asbestos was present it had contaminated the whole route, including the lift and many people had been exposed to asbestos fibres. A specialist asbestos removal contractor had to be employed to decontaminate the affected areas. The serious mistake caused major disruption, unnecessary stress to individuals and cost many thousands of pounds. More importantly, it will not be known for many years whether anyone will become ill as a result of this incident.

**STEP 7 MONITOR AND REVIEW**

- Check that the arrangements to control the risk have been implemented.
- Review the plan regularly and particularly if conditions change.

REMEMBER DON'T PANIC

- Managing asbestos in a building does not necessarily involve removing it. Asbestos in good condition and unlikely to be disturbed does not have to be removed. Removing it can be more dangerous than retaining it.
- Do not assume that you need to bring in a specialist in every case. You can inspect your own premises and if in doubt presume that materials contain asbestos.

■ For Further Information:

HSG 227 A Comprehensive Guide to Managing Asbestos
Health and Safety Executive
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