



A guide to the

HSE Asbestos Regulations 1998

Introduction

This bulletin provides general health and safety information for people who work with, or come into contact with, asbestos or products containing asbestos.

What is asbestos?

Asbestos is a group of naturally occurring fibrous minerals. There are two major groups of asbestos minerals:

- the serpentine group, containing chrysotile (commonly called *white asbestos*); and
- the amphibole group that contains crocidolite (*blue asbestos*) and amosite (*brown asbestos*).

Less commonly encountered are the fibrous forms of anthophyllite, tremolite and actinolite.

Where is it found?

Asbestos is found in brake and clutch linings and in certain building products formerly used in New Zealand. These products include asbestos cement cladding, textured ceiling coatings, thermal insulation around pipes and boilers, and fire-protective linings on structural steel (limpet asbestos).

What are the health hazards of asbestos?

Asbestos can cause asbestosis, lung cancer and mesothelioma, if sufficient asbestos fibres are deposited in the lungs. Most researchers believe there is an exposure “threshold” (or amount of asbestos fibre that must be exceeded) before a disease develops, and that the risk is related to the lifetime respiratory dose of asbestos.

Asbestosis, or scarring of lung tissue, results from inhaling significant amounts of asbestos over a period of years. The symptoms include shortness of breath and a dry cough. Minor changes on a lung X-ray may appear without symptoms.

Lung cancer is related to the amount of asbestos fibre inhaled and the risk is increased considerably in people who smoke cigarettes.

Mesothelioma is a rare cancer involving the pleura (outer lining of the lung) or less commonly the peritoneum (lining of the abdominal cavity). Although mainly linked to blue asbestos exposure, mesothelioma may also be associated with other forms of asbestos.

Generally there is a relatively long lag between a person’s first exposure to asbestos and the onset of symptoms or the detection of disease. Asbestos disease may continue to develop long after the exposure to asbestos stops.

Legislation and OSH guidelines

Work with asbestos is regulated under the Health and Safety in Employment (Asbestos) Regulations 1998. These regulations place duties on those working with asbestos.

The OSH publication *Guidelines for the Management and Removal of Asbestos* expands on the requirements set out in the regulations and provides guidance for employers and others on procedures to follow when working with asbestos and products that contain asbestos. Copies of the guidelines are available from OSH offices.

Minimising the risk posed by asbestos

Where contact with asbestos-containing products cannot be avoided, then all practicable steps must be taken to minimise exposure to asbestos fibres. This may be achieved by:

- Ensuring that effective steps are taken to stop or limit the release of asbestos fibres into the air.
- Ensuring that sound work practices are used to avoid the spread of asbestos contamination on clothing and footwear (wearing disposable outer clothing is recommended).
- Using dust extraction equipment where the generation of fibres from a process cannot be avoided.
- Where all other steps have been taken and the possibility of excessive exposure remains, to minimise the inhalation of asbestos fibres by using appropriate respiratory protection.

Identification and management of asbestos in buildings

Property owners should identify asbestos products in their properties and record the location and condition of the material. A management plan should be put in place that includes informing tenants on the presence of asbestos and the steps being taken to minimise the risk to occupants. Contractors working on the building should also be informed of the presence of asbestos.

Employers must take all practicable steps to provide a safe working environment for employees. To achieve this, employers should liaise with the property owners on the existence and condition of asbestos in the building. The management plan that is put in place need not involve the removal of asbestos products from a building. If the product is stable, only ongoing surveillance may be required. Otherwise, encapsulation or enclosure may be an option. The options for controlling the risks presented by asbestos in buildings and structures are discussed in the *Guidelines for the Management and Removal of Asbestos*.

Carrying out work involving asbestos

The Health and Safety in Employment (Asbestos) Regulations specify particular tasks as “restricted work” that must be notified to OSH before work begins. These tasks must be carried out by a person holding a certificate of competence for this work, or by someone under direct supervision of a person holding a certificate. The regulations also specify controls that apply to anyone working with asbestos.

Restricted work

The regulations define restricted work as:

- Work involving asbestos, if the asbestos concerned is friable and used in thermal or acoustic insulation, or fire protection, in buildings, ships, structures, or vehicles.
- Work involving asbestos, if the asbestos concerned is friable and used in lagging around boilers, ducts, furnaces or pipes.

- The demolition or maintenance of anything, including a building or part of a building, containing friable asbestos.
- The encapsulation of materials containing friable asbestos.
- The use of a power tool, with any kind of cutting blade or abrasive device, on asbestos cement or other bonded product containing asbestos, except when used with dust control equipment.
- Dry sanding of vinyl asbestos floor coverings.

Medical examinations

Under the provisions of the Health and Safety in Employment Act, employers are required to monitor the health of employees. Because of the particular hazards of work with asbestos, it is essential to monitor employees who carry out restricted work with asbestos. This monitoring may include chest x-rays and lung function tests. The OSH departmental medical officer may also require any other person undertaking work with asbestos to have a medical examination. Employees who may have been exposed to asbestos are also invited to enter their names and appropriate exposure details in the Asbestos Exposure Register administered by OSH.

Disposal of asbestos waste

All asbestos waste must be placed in closed containers clearly marked in letters at least 25 mm high: *Asbestos hazard - Wear respirator and protective clothing while handling the contents.*

Waste must be disposed of at a place approved by a territorial authority and immediately covered by not less than 1 metre of earth. Every employer must take all practicable steps to ensure that no previously used product that contains asbestos is reused or offered for sale.

Further information and advice

For more information on the legal requirements, contact your local Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) office.