Asbestos Awareness Handbook

Warning: This is not a guide to working safely with asbestos, rather information to assist you in avoiding
work with asbestos

What is Asbestos?

Asbestos is a naturally occurring group of minerals that were used extensively as building material during the 1950s - 1980s. It was useful as an insulator, has good fire protection properties and resisted against corrosion.

Because asbestos is often mixed with another material, it's hard to know if you're working with it or not. But, if you work in a building built before the year 2000, it's likely that some parts of the building will contain asbestos.

Asbestos is found in many products used in buildings, including ceiling tiles, pipe insulation, boilers and sprayed coatings.

Asbestos is currently the greatest single work-related cause of death from ill health.

Past exposure is now responsible for about 4000 people dying from asbestos related cancers every year. This figure is expected to rise over the next ten years and then decline. These deaths are tragic for the people involved, causing immense pain and suffering to them and their relatives, friends and colleagues.

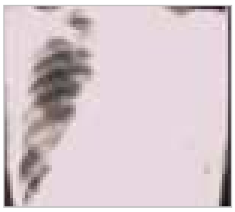
There are three main types of asbestos:

However, the type of asbestos cannot be identified just by its colour and ALL types of asbestos can be dangerous.

Asbestos is made up of thin fibres. These can break down into much smaller and thinner fibres. The smallest fibres cannot be seen with the naked eye but they can be breathed in. The fibres that are breathed in can become stuck in the lungs and damage them.

What is the danger?

Asbestos exposure can cause four serious diseases (described below). These diseases will not affect you immediately; they often take a long time to develop, but once diagnosed, it is often too late to do anything.



Mesothelioma

Mesothelioma is a cancer which affects the lining of the lungs (pleura) and the lining surrounding the lower digestive tract (peritoneum). It is almost exclusively related to asbestos exposure and by the time it is diagnosed, it is almost always fatal.

Asbestos-related lung cancer

Asbestos-related lung cancer is the same as (looks the same as) lung cancer caused by smoking and other causes. It is estimated that there is around one lung cancer for every mesothelioma death.

Asbestosis

Asbestosis is a serious scarring condition of the lung that normally occurs after heavy exposure to asbestos over many years. This condition can cause progressive shortness of breath, and in severe cases can be fatal.

Pleural thickening

Pleural thickening is generally a problem that happens after heavy asbestos exposure. The lining of the lung (pleura) thickens and swells. If this gets worse, the lung itself can be squeezed, and can cause shortness of breath and discomfort in the chest.

Smoking

If you smoke, and have also been exposed to asbestos fibres, the risk of developing lung cancer is greatly increased due to a 'synergistic effect'.

Asbestos fibres will stay within your body, probably for the rest of you life, however you can decrease the risk of developing cancer by simply giving up smoking.

What were the common uses?

Sprayed coating

Found as fire protection on structural supports (e.g. columns/beams).

It is a high hazard asbestos product and can generate very high fibre levels if disturbed.

Pipe Insulation

Asbestos thermal pipe lagging is a high hazard asbestos product.

Asbestos insulating board (AIB) ceiling and door panels

AIB is a high hazard asbestos product and can generate high levels of fibres if the board is cut or drilled.

AIB window panel

Like other AIB, this is a high hazard asbestos product, and if in good condition should be left undisturbed.

Floor tiles

Vinyl (PVC) or thermoplastic tiles contain asbestos.

Asbestos cement roof sheeting

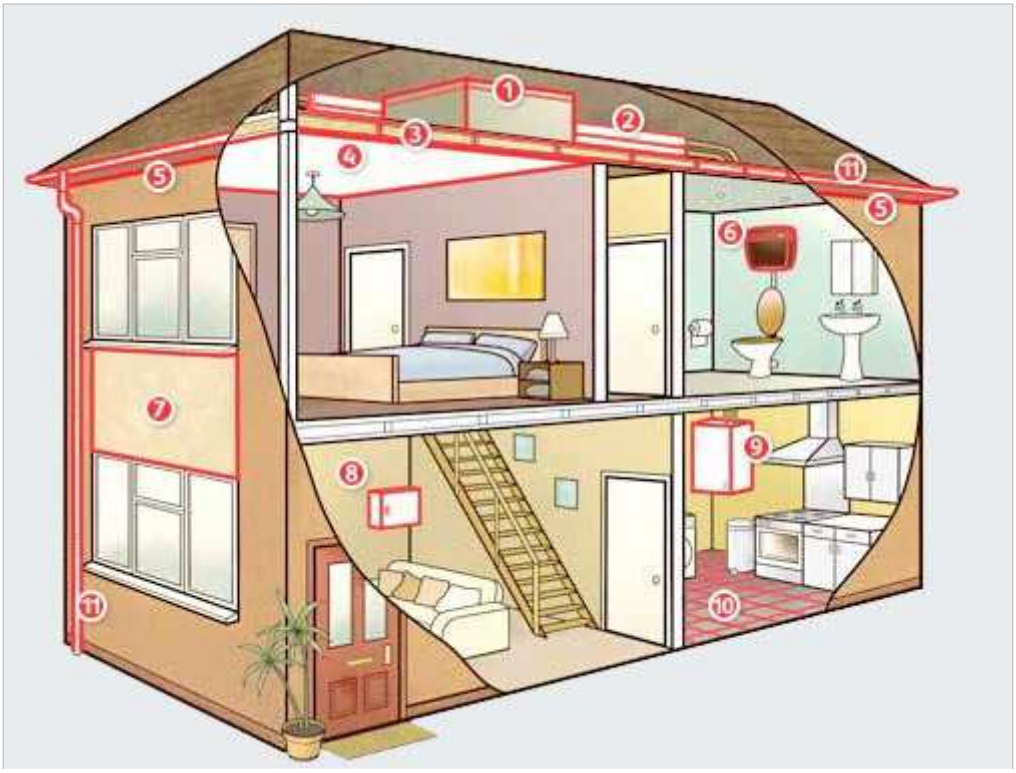
Asbestos cement sheeting is often found on industrial building roofs and walls.

Textured decorative coating (e.g. Artex)

Textured coatings contain a small amount of asbestos. The asbestos is well bonded and fibres are not easily released. However, it is still an asbestos product, and as such, needs to be worked with safely.

Where is asbestos found?

Asbestos could be present in any building that was built or refurbished before the year 2000.



1. Water Tank:
   Is often made of asbestos cement and found in older properties (pre 1980).
2. Pipe Lagging:
   Asbestos insulation on pipes. Used to keep heat in or cold out. Often painted over or protected by outer coating so not obviously asbestos.
3. Property Insulation:
   Loose asbestos can be found as insulation in wall and floor cavities and in lofts.
4. Textured coating (eg artex):
   Can be found throughout property on ceilings and sometimes walls.
5. Soffit Board (roof overhang):
   Soffit board sits behind fascia at eaves level. Board can be made from asbestos cement or asbestos insulating board.
6. Toilet cistern:
   Toilet cisterns can contain asbestos-reinforced resin composite materials.
7. Wall Panelling:
   Asbestos can be found as external wall cladding and as internal wall panelling both particularly around windows.
8. Fuse box:
   Often found in hall or under stairs. Each fuse wire has an individual asbestos flash guard. Panel behind fuse box can be asbestos.
9. Heater Cupboard:
   Heater cupboard around domestic boiler often contains asbestos insulating board.
10. Floor tiles:
    Vinyl and thermoplastic floor tiles can contain asbestos. The tile backing may also contain asbestos paper.
11. Rainwater items:
    Roof gutters and down pipes can often be made of asbestos cement.

How do you avoid the risk of exposure?

Before you start work on anywhere built before the year 2000:


Check that you are not working on asbestos containing materials


For non-domestic premises (houses, factories, offices, schools, hospitals etc), request the asbestos register, which includes information on the location and condition of asbestos, before commencement of work


Do not start work if you are not sure if there is asbestos where you are working


Do not assume there will always be warning signs for pre-identified asbestos


Do not attempt to work with any asbestos unless you are fully trained, authorised and competent to do so, and the correct precautions are in place


Do not attempt to clear up any accidental damage yourself. This will require specialist training and equipment (e.g. class H vacuum, FFP3 respirator, PPE)


Do not take any contaminated clothing home with you. This will require specialist laundry or disposal. Minimise the spread as much as possible

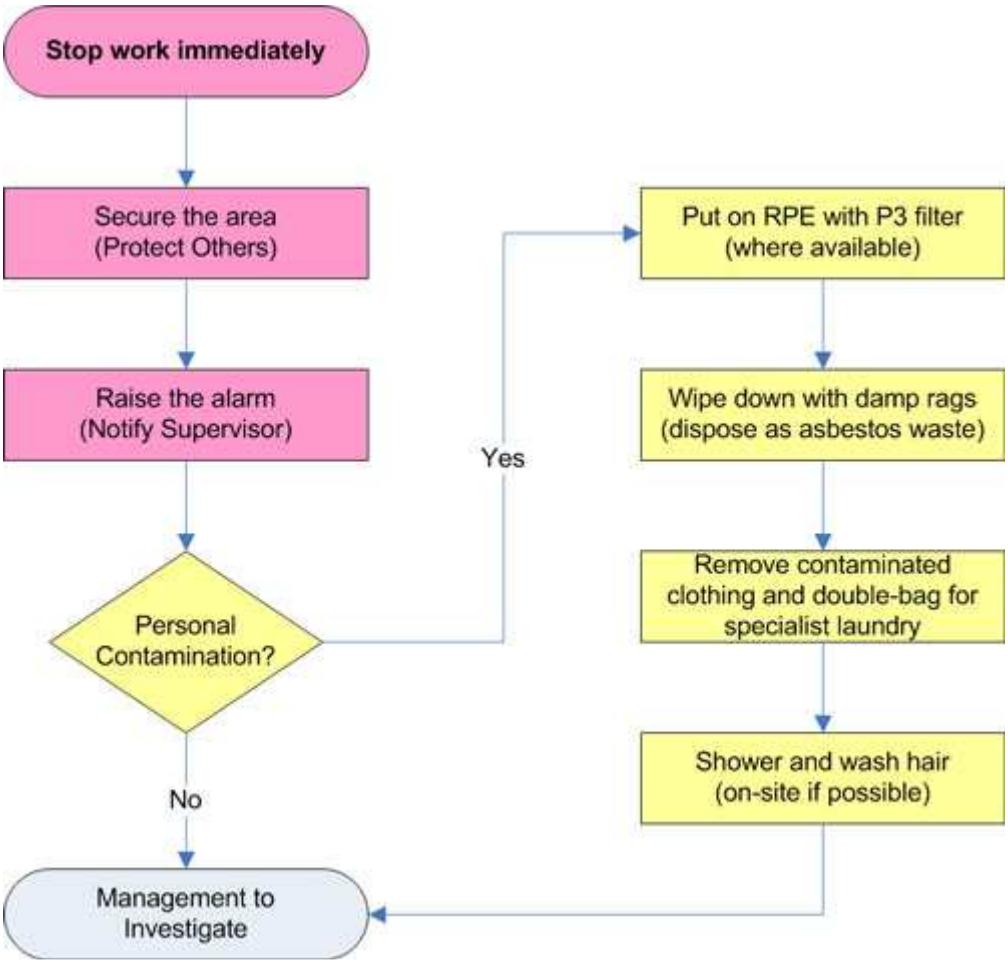

Know the emergency procedure if you discover or accidentally disturb a suspected ACM and be ready to protect yourself and others


If you are ever in any doubt - speak to your supervisor before continuing

Remember: you cannot see asbestos fibres in the air, this is why it is called the ‘hidden killer’.

What are the emergency arrangements?

In the event of discovery or accidental damage of a suspected ACM the following procedure shall be followed:



Do not reoccupy the area until it is safe and you have been authorised to do so.

Notes