Asbestos Dangers Safety Meeting Kit

WHAT’S AT STAKE

Asbestos is a naturally occurring mineral, which was long valued for its strength and heat resistance, making it the material of choice for insulation and fireproofing, until a few decades ago.

To make buildings safer and stronger, builders and engineers added it to the cement underfoot, the ceiling tiles overhead and many other construction materials.

Asbestos has been used in products, such as insulation for pipes (steam lines for example), floor tiles, building materials, and in vehicle brakes and clutches. Some occupations whose workers have historically been exposed include construction workers, demolition crews, shipyard workers, automobile technicians, and those who worked in factories that produced asbestos-containing materials.

WHAT’ S THE DANGER

HAZARDS / DANGERS

When materials that contain asbestos are disturbed or damaged, fibres are released into the air. When these fibres are inhaled they can cause serious diseases. 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. This is why it is important that you protect yourself now.

Asbestos can cause the following fatal and serious diseases:

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.

HOW TO PROTECT YOURSELF

INITIAL STEPS

The first step in protecting yourself is to understand where asbestos can be found. Such as, floor tiles, fire doors, pipe and boiler wrap, cementing compounds used in plumbing, older shingles and siding, brake linings and clutch pedals.

4 Ways to Keep Yourself Safe While Working Near Asbestos

1. **Think asbestos**

- Has the site been checked for asbestos?
- Know the materials you are working with – is there a chance they might contain asbestos e.g. Roof panels, soundproof panels, heat resistant materials
- Stop work if you think there might be asbestos present in the material you are working with and report it to the site manager.

2. **Levels of protection**

- **You're at a low risk** of asbestos exposure if you are working alongside but not disturbing asbestos sheets or products. In this case,
- No protection is needed but you should be made aware that asbestos is present.
- Your employer should have an exposure minimization plan in place.
- **You're at a moderate risk** of exposure if you're using power tools to cut asbestos product or removing asbestos products that risk breaking. In these situations:
- PPE and a respirator are needed, with dust extraction measures at the site.
- Warning signs must be posted around the area to warn of exposure risk.
- Protective polythene sheeting should be put down.
- Wet methods of sweeping, mopping, or vacuuming dust must be used.
- All asbestos containing material must be disposed of dust per regulatory requirements.
- Asbestos abatement workers have a high level of exposure risk and additional levels of protection and training are required.

3. **Clothing and handling considerations are important because asbestos fibers can leave the site on clothing and footwear and be breathed in by family or the public.**

- Protective clothing must include the head and feet, such as lace-free footwear or boot covers.
- A coverall designed to prevent asbestos fibers from getting in with a snug fit to the neck, wrists and ankles should be used.
- **PPE should be disposable if possible.**
- If not:
- PPE should ONLY be removed on site.
- Washing must only be done in laundries specifically set up for handling asbestos-contaminated clothing.

4. **Breathe clean air.**

- DO NOT USE single use, or disposable respirators during work with asbestos.
- Air purifying masks that filter asbestos fibers out of the air may be suitable in some cases. Remember to change and dispose of filters per manufacturer’s instructions.
- In many cases a full-face air supplying respirator is required to provide maximum protection.

FINAL WORD

While much of the occupational exposure to asbestos in developed countries has decreased, there is still exposure all across the world to this carcinogen. Cases of mesothelioma are still being diagnosed in the United States today due to exposure decades ago. Protect yourself by not disturbing any materials that could possibly have asbestos in them.