

Safety Corner

What are the risks associated with asbestos?

Asbestos is a name given to six minerals that occur naturally in the environment as bundles of fibres that can be separated into thin, durable threads for use in commercial and industrial applications. These fibres are resistant to heat, fire, and chemicals, and do not conduct electricity. For these reasons, asbestos has been used widely in many industries.

Asbestos-containing materials will not release asbestos fibres into the air unless they are disturbed or damaged. For example, if an asbestos ceiling tile is drilled or broken, fibres are released into the air. When these fibres are inhaled they can cause the following fatal and serious diseases:

- 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.
- Asbestos-induced carcinomas, the most common of which is lung cancer, with tobacco usage frequently being a significant contributing factor.
- Asbestos-related non-malignant conditions include pleural plaques (a pleura is a membrane around the lungs), pleural effusion and diffuse pleural thickening, which can but usually do not develop into malignant conditions.
- Mesothelioma is a malignant disease of the membrane tissue around the lungs (pleural mesothelioma), intestine (peritoneal mesothelium) or heart (pericardial mesothelium), with death occurring within a year of diagnosis. It is almost exclusively related to asbestos exposure and by the time it is diagnosed, it is almost always fatal.

Eight simple steps can be taken to avoid the accidental release of asbestos fibres that people might breathe in:

- 1 Know where it is
- 2 Record where it is
- 3 Complete a risk assessment
- 4 Create a management plan
- 5 Planning to work on asbestos-containing materials
- 6 Inform those who are potentially exposed
- 7 Train workers
- 8 Investigate asbestos incidents

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