

Working Around Asbestos

At least 3500 people in Great Britain die each year from asbestos-related diseases and lung cancer as a result of past exposure to asbestos. Annual numbers of deaths are predicted to go on rising.

Asbestos was widely used in the construction industry, due to its excellent heat-resistant properties, up to 1999. Any work on buildings older than this should be checked for asbestos before any work is started. Asbestos may only be removed by licensed contractors in controlled conditions, ie: full protective clothing and masks, sealed working enclosures and contaminated waste removal procedures.

Asbestos is only harmful when disturbed and it breaks into tiny long sharp fibres; these fibres are then released as dust into the air. When inhaled, these fibres get lodged and scar the lungs, potentially causing asbestosis, fibrosis and lung cancer. Asbestos which is not disturbed cannot release fibres and therefore should not be harmful. Smokers are at an increased risk of asbestos-related diseases. No one knows how much asbestos needs to be breathed in to lead to health being affected. What is known is that the more fibres breathed in, the greater the risk.

You could find asbestos:

- As a sprayed insulating coating on steelwork and concrete, etc
- As lagging on pipes and boilers, etc
- As insulation board in walls, on doors and ceilings
- As asbestos cement roofs, wall coverings, pipes and tanks, etc
- In some decorative plasters, eg: ceiling tiles, Artex or similar
- You cannot tell if something contains asbestos by just looking, it has to be surveyed and tested by specialists

What you should do:

- Ask whether there has been a check for asbestos where you are working
- If there hasn't and the building was constructed before 1999 – stop and ask your supervisor why there isn't a survey and what measures are in place to stop accidental contamination
- If you come across any material that you believe may contain asbestos, do not disturb it. **Stop and alert your supervisor** and the Interserve Project Services management.

If you suspect asbestos has been disturbed:

- Clear the area of other people
- Close all doors and windows in the area to prevent further spread
- Alert your supervisor and the Interserve Project Services management, explaining your concerns about asbestos
- Do not restart work in the area until you have been told it is safe to do so.

Questions:

- 1 why was asbestos so widely used?
- 2 in what age of building is asbestos potentially present?
- 3 how should you clear up asbestos if it is accidentally released?

Remember:

Do not attempt to clean the area yourself. Do not use brooms or any tools that create or stir up dust, asbestos can only be removed by licensed contractors.

Further Information: CIP Manual, Section 24
www.hse.gov.uk