

Asbestos Exposure



Health effects of asbestos exposure are asbestosis, lung cancer, and mesothelioma. It can take years for the harm to become evident. 220 people die from asbestos related disease every year.

Awareness of hazards:

Asbestos is a naturally occurring silicate that was extensively used in building materials up until the 2000's. It was commonly mixed with other materials, making it difficult to identify, and is dangerous when the fibres are released and inhaled.

Asbestos-containing materials (ACM) are commonly found in sprayed-on fireproofing, soundproofing, insulation, decorative coatings, floor coverings (e.g., vinyl), cladding, and roofing.

Friable ACMs are especially dangerous as the materials are easily crushed (e.g., insulation). Asbestos-containing dust (debris) (ACD) is any settled dust or debris that does or is assumed to contain asbestos. Exposure to ACD should be registered with MBIE.

Eliminate or minimise risks (hierarchy of controls):

Risk controls focus on either the hazard or the behaviour of workers and others.

- **Eliminate the hazard.** ACM and ACD should be removed by professionals.
- **Substitute the hazard.** ACMs should not be used in new builds.
- **Isolate the hazard.** Sites where ACMs are present should be isolated and contained. ACM work areas should have plastic drop sheets.
- **Engineered modifications.** Use only micro filter vacuums. No pressured water hoses.

Focusing on human behaviours include:

- **Administration of safe systems of work.** Low-pressure wet work methods. All ACM removal by competent person. Training of all workers likely to encounter asbestos. Areas should be properly cleaned, surfaces wiped down, and ACM disposed as per guidance.
- **Personal protection equipment (Personal behaviours).** Full and oversized disposable PPE. Disposable P2 mask minimum. Dispose of PPE in double bag and clearly label as containing ACD

Understanding risks:

Asbestos is encountered by many tradespeople but is especially dangerous in demolition environments where products are damaged. Sanding, drilling, and cutting ACMs also releases the fibres. Asbestos fibres lodge in the lung tissue and scarring can develop into tumours. Asbestos can also affect others when dusty clothing is worn home.

Removing asbestos on work sites is usually notified to WorkSafe and carried out by certified workers under a removal licence/plan (ref. Health and Safety at Work (Asbestos) Regulations 2016). An employer cannot direct or allow a worker to work around asbestos.

Safe behaviour is avoiding and reporting asbestos. **Unsafe behaviour** is disturbing and handling asbestos.