

Asbestos fact sheet

Asbestos is the single biggest cause of work-related deaths in the UK. Asbestos-related diseases such as mesothelioma, asbestosis and lung cancer are thought to be responsible for up to 3,000 deaths each year due to past exposure.

Q. What is asbestos?

A. Asbestos is a naturally occurring fibrous material and has been used for about 150 years on a large scale. It is versatile, plentiful and ideal as a fire-proofing and insulation material. But it can be deadly!

Q. Why is it dangerous?

A. If you inhale asbestos fibres (which are long and thin) they can become lodged in the tissue of your chest and your body's natural defences may not be able to easily break them down. This can lead to lung diseases (mainly cancers), particularly if you are repeatedly exposed to fibres over a number of years. These diseases can take many years to develop.

Q. Where is it normally found?

A. Asbestos was widely used in buildings between 1945 and 1985 and thousands of tons are still present in all types of buildings. Asbestos cement was used up until 1999 in a variety of different premises and materials. The Health and Safety Executive estimate that up to 500,000 commercial, industrial and public buildings in the UK are likely to contain asbestos materials, in addition to many hundreds of thousands domestic properties.

Any building that was built or had major refurbishment between the 1950's and mid 80's is likely to contain some type of asbestos containing material. Use of asbestos peaked in the 60's and early 70's – premises built or refurbished during this time are the most likely to contain some form of asbestos.

Asbestos is most likely to be found in these locations:

- Sprayed asbestos and asbestos loose packing - generally used as fire protection in ducts, firebreaks in ceiling voids and around structural steel work
- Moulded or pre-formed lagging - generally used in thermal insulation of pipes and boilers
- Insulating boards used for fire protection, thermal insulation, partitioning and ducts e.g. panels, partitions, soffit boards and ceiling panels
- Some ceiling tiles
- Millboard, paper and paper products used for insulation of electrical equipment. Asbestos paper has also been used as a fire-proof facing on wood fibreboard

- Asbestos cement products, which can be fully or semi-compressed into flat or corrugated sheets. Corrugated sheets are largely used as roofing and wall cladding. Other asbestos cement products include gutters, rainwater pipes and water tanks
- Certain textured coatings
- Bitumen roofing material
- Vinyl or thermoplastic floor tiles

Important: Generally, asbestos is only a risk if asbestos fibres are being released into the air and inhaled. If asbestos containing materials are in good condition and in a position where they are not likely to be damaged, worked on (e.g. drilled, cut or sawn etc.) or disturbed it is generally safer to leave them in place and manage the risk. Their condition should be regularly monitored to identify deterioration.

Since May 2004, owners of non-domestic properties have had additional legal duties to manage the risk from asbestos under the Control of Asbestos at Work Regulations 2002. These regulations do not apply to self-contained domestic properties, but do apply to common parts, e.g. hallways in flats.

These were replaced by The Control of Asbestos Regulations 2006, which came into force on 13th November 2006. These Regulations bring together the three previous sets of Regulations covering the prohibition of asbestos, the control of asbestos at work and asbestos licensing.