

What you should know about working with asbestos (information sheet)

Introduction

Anyone who works on the fabric of a building may be at risk of disturbing asbestos. Common occupations include:

- electricians, joiners, plumbers, gas fitters, shop fitters, heating and ventilation engineers
- labourers, roofers, plasterers and other construction workers
- phone and data engineers, alarm installers
- surveyors, general maintenance engineers, painters and decorators.

Any building built before 1 January 2000 is likely to contain asbestos. However, it is still possible for more recently-constructed buildings to contain asbestos.

Asbestos can be in places that you might not expect, so you could come into contact with it without knowing about it beforehand.

Once asbestos-containing materials (ACMs) are disturbed, tiny asbestos fibres are released. These fibres are hazardous, and if breathed in can cause lung disease and cancer.

If you don't take the right precautions to protect yourself, you're risking your life and your livelihood.

Did you know?

- Most cases of asbestos-related diseases are caused by exposure in the workplace.
- More than 170 New Zealanders die each year from diseases related to past asbestos exposure.
- Every tradesperson is likely to come into contact with asbestos at work.
- Asbestos remains common in homes, business premises and public buildings today.
- When done regularly, even small jobs like drilling a hole could expose you to the danger.

What to do if you uncover or damage materials that may contain asbestos

- Stop the work immediately.
- Keep people away.
- Minimise the spread of contamination to other areas.
- Get advice on what to do next.

Removing asbestos

From 4 April 2016, if more than 10 m² of non-friable asbestos has to be removed over the whole course of the project for the site, it must be done by a licensed asbestos removalist.

All friable asbestos removal work (where the number of fibres released is likely to be high) must also be carried out by a licensed asbestos removalist. This includes work on asbestos lagging, asbestos insulation and damaged asbestos board.

A licensed asbestos removalist can be a person holding a current Certificate of Competence until April 2018.

Working with asbestos

Simple ways to protect yourself

It's really important that you take precautions to protect yourself against asbestos, even on small jobs that don't seem to create much dust.

Remember

If possible, plan the job to avoid disturbing any asbestos.

If the asbestos has to be disturbed, don't start work until you have double-checked how to do it safely and that you have the right information and training.



Figures 1, 2 and 3: Asbestos can be in places that you might not expect; including behind fuse boxes, in roofing, and window sills

Three simple things will help keep you safe

Three simple things will help keep you safe when doing asbestos work:

1. Keep dust down.
2. Use the right protective equipment.
3. Clean up properly.

Keep dust down

1. Keep ACM damp, but not too wet.
 - Before you start a job, and if it is safe to do so, wet materials using a low-pressure water spray such as a garden sprayer or a hand-held water spray. Continue wetting the ACM as you work. This will reduce the amount of dust.
 - Do not use a hose as this can be high-pressure and will spread the dust around.
 - A mixture of eight parts water to one part washing-up liquid will help the water soak into the material.
 - OR
 - Use thickened substances, pastes and gels, such as wallpaper paste, hair gel or shaving cream to cover the surfaces of the ACM being worked on.
2. Only use power tools set at the lowest speed so you do not create a lot of dust. Use dust collection equipment wherever possible.
3. Use plastic sheets to cover your work area to help stop the spread of dust. They will also make cleaning up easier.

Use the right protective equipment

Wear a mask

- Not all masks protect from asbestos.
- A disposable P2 mask with a valve is the minimum needed for this work. P1 or 'nuisance dust' masks will not provide the protection you need.
- Don't re-use disposable masks.
- Make sure your mask fits properly. Facial hair and stubble make it almost impossible to get a good seal between your face and the mask.

Wear overalls

- Disposable overalls will stop the tiny asbestos fibres getting on your clothes.
- Don't re-use disposable overalls.
- Wear the overalls one size too big as it will help prevent ripping at the seams.
- Make sure you put the legs of the overalls over the top of your footwear – don't tuck them in as it lets in dust.

Clean up properly

It's really important to clean up properly so that you safely remove and dispose of the asbestos waste.

The work area and tools

- Clean up as you go to stop waste building up.
- Use a damp cloth to wipe down tools and surfaces to remove asbestos fibres. Do not re-use the cloth. It must be disposed of as asbestos waste.
- Don't sweep up because this will spread asbestos fibres into the air.
- Don't use domestic vacuum cleaners to clean up asbestos dust. Use a vacuum with a type of filter designed to capture fine particles like asbestos.

Personal clean-up

- Dispose of disposable masks and overalls safely after you have finished the job. The mask and overalls are asbestos waste.
- Don't take overalls home or wear them in vehicles. This will prevent people at home being exposed to asbestos fibres.

Disposal

- Make sure all waste, including masks, overalls, cloths and plastic sheets are double-bagged in heavy-duty plastic bags, sealed with tape and marked as asbestos waste.
- Dispose of the asbestos waste at an authorised disposal site. Contact the local tips in your area to find one that accepts asbestos waste.

Finishing the job

- Visually inspect the area to make sure it has been cleaned properly.

From 4 April 2016 regulations on asbestos work will change. This includes the introduction of a new asbestos removal licensing system. Find out more at www.business.govt.nz/worksafe/asbestos