

## Asbestos

### *What is Asbestos?*

Asbestos is the generic name for six natural occurring minerals that were used in commercial products for their strength, flexibility, low electrical conductivity, and resistance to heat and chemicals. These six types are Chrysotile, Amosite, Crocidolite, Tremolite, Anthophyllite, and Actinolite. Of these six types, Chrysotile is the most common and makes up 95% of asbestos around the world. Due to the appealing characteristics of asbestos, it has been mined and used commercially since the late 1800's and can be found in building materials such as in pipe insulation, spray on fireproofing, acoustical plaster, ceiling and floor tiles, adhesives, coatings, corrugated paper, caulk and mastic. Because of the harmful health effects of asbestos exposure, in 1989 the Environmental Protection Agency issued a partial ban on the manufacturer, import, processing and distribution of asbestos containing products and materials such as those mentioned above.. However, despite the ban on these materials many buildings contain asbestos containing materials today.

### *Asbestos Exposure*

Asbestos exposure can occur when asbestos containing material is disturbed when performing activities such as cutting, drilling, sawing, hammering, or sanding asbestos containing materials (ACM) and releasing fibers into the air. Once the fibers are released, they can enter the body through the nose and mouth by inhalation or from drinking. In order to avoid and prevent exposure to asbestos, you must be aware of the locations it is likely to be found, and wear the appropriate personal protective equipment. No amount of asbestos exposure is safe, and can be fatal when a person is exposed to a large concentration, or exposed on a regular basis over a long period of time.

### **Tips for Success When Talking to Your Team**

**Preparation is Key:** Keep the topic relevant. Work with your team to review common asbestos related incidents in your workplace and discuss how they can be avoided.

**Stay Positive:** Keep the focus on what can be done to create a safe work place, instead of focusing on what has gone wrong in the past.

**Share a Story, Ask for a Story:** Storytelling is a powerful method to convey information. Stories from your employees make the topic even more relatable.

Do you or your team have a safety story you'd like to share? Contact Risk Management at [gwen.butler@northwestern.edu](mailto:gwen.butler@northwestern.edu) for details.

### *How do I know if the material contains asbestos?*

Remember that you cannot tell if floor or ceiling tiles contain asbestos just by looking at them. If you do not know whether something is asbestos or not, assume that it is and contact your supervisor until it is verified. If you come across possible asbestos-containing material that is damaged or disturbed do not attempt to clean it up yourself.



### *Health Effects*

Once exposed to asbestos, adverse health effects are not immediate, and typically take 10-40 years for symptoms to manifest. Also, if you smoke and are exposed to asbestos, your chances of developing an asbestos-related disease is increased by 80% exposure.

The common asbestos-related diseases are mesothelioma, asbestosis, lung cancer, and digestive system cancer. According to the American Cancer Society, about 3,000 Americans annually are diagnosed with Mesothelioma, caused almost exclusively by asbestos.

### *Awareness and Training*

If you must work around asbestos, you must complete the recommended training such as the 16-hour Asbestos Operations and Maintenance instructional, or asbestos awareness training depending on the level of work you are performing. Furthermore, make sure the appropriate personal protective equipment, such as a respirator, gloves and Tyvek suits are worn at all times.



**Learn more:** Complete *Asbestos Awareness* training at [learn.northwestern.edu](http://learn.northwestern.edu)

## Safety at Home

Asbestos is often found in building materials of older homes. When planning home remodels, consider these home safety tips to prevent exposure:

- ✓ Ensure you have a licensed inspector sample appropriate building materials
- ✓ If asbestos is present, hire an asbestos contractor to remove it safely
- ✓ Do not try and abate the asbestos yourself and put your family at risk of exposure

## For Additional Information

Contact Gwen Butler, Director, Environmental Health & Safety, at 847.491.4936