

Asbestos in Construction

Hazard Alert



Asbestos can hurt your lungs and many uses for it have been banned. But this mineral is still used in construction, mainly in roof panels and packing gaskets. And construction workers still are exposed to asbestos during remodeling and demolition: Asbestos is often in old fireproofing, roofing, vinyl flooring, pipe and boiler insulation, and some roads and cement pipe and cement sheet products.

Thousands of construction workers have died from diseases caused by work with — or near — asbestos without protection. And 10,000 people are expected to die each year for the next 10 years because of past exposures to asbestos. Asbestos diseases can sometimes take 20 years or more to show up after you are exposed. All kinds of asbestos are dangerous.

The Hazard

The construction trades most at risk from asbestos have been insulators, plumbers and pipefitters, electricians, and sheet metal workers. But **any construction worker may be in danger during maintenance, remodeling, or demolition of an old building or road.** Sometimes workers' families are at risk, too, from asbestos taken home on workers' clothes or shoes.

Some asbestos fibers are so small you cannot see them. They are the most dangerous because they can get in your lungs.

Asbestos can cause *asbestosis*, which scars your lungs and makes it hard to breathe. You can also get *lung cancer* or *mesothelioma*. Mesothelioma is a cancer of the lining of the chest or stomach. **All kinds of asbestos can give you these diseases, including chrysotile asbestos.**

The more you are exposed to asbestos, the more chance you will get sick later on.

Protect Yourself

Any building built before 1980 can have asbestos in the insulation, fireproofing, floors, walls, or roof. Newer buildings can have asbestos in the roof or floors. If you do not know if there is asbestos in a building (or road), OSHA says you must act as if there is asbestos.

- **Before you disturb asbestos** (loosen the fibers), you must have special training. This is what OSHA and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) say. Your employer must pay for your training. The training takes from 1 to 4 days. In some cases, you must get more training each year.

(Please turn the page.)

- **Where there is asbestos work, there should be a “competent person,”** as defined by OSHA, to answer your questions. The competent person should know the requirements for personal protection and inspect the job regularly.
- **If you disturb or remove asbestos,** you must wear at least a half-face respirator with N-, R-, or P-100 (HEPA) cartridges. The cartridges are magenta (red-purple). OSHA says you must use the respirator, except in some cases, like some roofing and flooring work. Ask the competent person if you have the protection you need.
- **Even if you wear a respirator,** try to reduce the asbestos in the air. OSHA and EPA say you must keep the asbestos wet. Vacuum the dust using special HEPA vacuums, which can capture very small fibers. Right away, collect and close all waste in special bags to hold asbestos.
- **Do not eat, drink, or smoke in an asbestos work area.** Clean your hands and face before you eat, drink, or smoke.
- **Family members of construction workers** have died of asbestos disease. They got sick from asbestos taken home on a worker’s clothes or shoes. So, leave your work clothes and shoes at work and wash them at work. Or use throw-away work clothes. If you do asbestos abatement, OSHA says you must shower before you leave work.
- **If you have been exposed to asbestos on the job,** go to a doctor who knows about work-related diseases or lung diseases. Tell the doctor you have worked around asbestos. Ask the doctor when you should be checked again.
- Both asbestos and smoking can cause lung cancer. So, **if you smoke,** quit.

You Should Know

The asbestos workers’, laborers’, and painters’ international unions provide special training and certification for asbestos abatement work. Some other unions arrange training for their members. Call your union or the Building and Construction Trades Department.

If you have questions about asbestos in schools, call the Environmental Protection Agency.

If you have other questions about asbestos, call your local union, the Center to Protect Workers’ Rights (301-578-8500 or www.cpwr.com), the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (1-800-35-NIOSH or www.cdc.gov/niosh), or the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA, www.osha.gov) or check www.elcosh.org.

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