

Asbestos Questions and Answers

Q: What is asbestos?

A: Asbestos is a mineral fiber found in rocks. There are several kinds of asbestos fibers, all of which are fire resistant and not easily destroyed or degraded by natural processes.

Q: Where is asbestos used?

A: Asbestos has been used in a wide variety of household and building materials, such as pipe and boiler insulation, floor tile and mastic, wall and ceiling materials such as decorative and acoustical plasters or tiles, and exterior siding and roofing materials. Asbestos was used in a product for one or more of the following reasons: (1) to strengthen the product; (2) for thermal insulation; (3) for acoustical or thermal insulation on surfaces; and (4) for fire protection.

Q: How can you tell if there is asbestos in a material?

A: The manufacturer, product literature or product labeling may identify the asbestos content. People with experience working with or evaluating asbestos-containing materials may be able to identify an asbestos-containing material by visual inspection. However, the definitive way to determine the asbestos content of a material is to have a qualified inspector sample the material and have it analyzed by microscopy in a laboratory qualified to perform asbestos analysis.

Q: Is asbestos dangerous?

A: Asbestos has been shown to cause cancer of the lung and lining of the lung (mesothelioma), as well as other non-cancerous lung diseases. Some asbestos materials can break into small fibers, which can get into the air and be breathed in. Once inhaled, fibers can become lodged in lung tissue for a long time. After many years (15-40) asbestos-related diseases can develop.

Q: Are all asbestos-containing materials a health risk?

A: No. A health risk only exists when asbestos fibers are released from a product or material and are present in the air for people to breathe. Soft, easily crumbled materials have the greatest potential for fiber release and therefore the greatest potential to create health risks.

Q: Do all people exposed to asbestos develop asbestos-related disease?

A: No. Most people exposed to small amounts of asbestos do not develop any health-related problems. Health studies of asbestos workers show however, that the greater the exposure to asbestos, the greater the risk of developing asbestos-related disease.

Q: How can exposure to asbestos be prevented?

A: Asbestos exposure can be prevented by maintaining materials in intact and sealed condition. When asbestos must be disturbed, as in renovation and repair operations, a combination of engineering controls (containment and ventilation) and dust suppression methods (wetting and other work practices) can prevent exposure to building occupants and minimize exposure to abatement workers.

Q: Should all asbestos be removed from a building?

A: No. Regulations require that asbestos-containing materials be maintained in intact and sealed condition. Scientists say that managing asbestos in-place is a prudent approach to minimizing hazards posed by asbestos. However, any disturbance of asbestos requires trained and certified personnel, as well as the mandatory use of engineering controls and work practices to prevent or minimize exposure to asbestos.

Q: Can anyone work with asbestos?

A: No. People who work with asbestos must be trained and certified in proper asbestos abatement work practices. Asbestos workers must participate in a medical surveillance program and must be qualified and approved to use respiratory protection. Contractors must be licensed to perform asbestos abatement. In addition, all qualified employees who perform inspection and sampling, design abatement projects and monitor the performance of abatement must be specially trained and certified to perform this work.

Q: How do you know that you are not exposed to asbestos during an abatement activity in your building?

A: Wake Forest University hires licensed, qualified contractors to perform abatement work on campus. WFU also has certified employees to oversee the work of the abatement contractor to ensure that all controls are adequately implemented. These employees perform inspections and sampling on a regular basis throughout the duration of abatement.

Q: If you encounter asbestos in your home or workplace, what should you do?

A: Do not disturb the material in any way. Avoid cleaning or maintenance activities that may disturb the material. Contact a qualified health professional to evaluate the material and recommend the proper course of action. If at work, notify your supervisor immediately. If it is necessary to clean or disturb the material, specially trained and licensed contractors should be utilized.