

Understand the Hazards of Asbestos

Overview

Asbestos is a fiber or filament that is used in clothing, automotive parts, and building materials. It may have a fluffy appearance. When mixed, it can be found in forms such as Chrysotile, Amosite, Crocidolite, Tremolite, Anthophyllite, and Actinolite.

Where can asbestos be found?

Asbestos is found in installed products such as shingles, floor tiles, cement pipe and sheet, roofing felts, insulation, ceiling tiles, fire-resistant drywall, and acoustical products. Very few asbestos-containing products are currently being installed. Consequently, most worker exposures occur during the removal of asbestos and the renovation and maintenance of buildings and structures containing asbestos.

Asbestos Symptoms

Should exposure occur, asbestos symptoms may not surface for many years. Acute exposure can cause shortness of breath, chest or abdominal pain, or irritation of the skin and mucous membranes. Chronic exposure can cause breathing difficulty, dry cough, broadening and thickening of the ends of the fingers, and bluish discoloration of the skin and mucous membranes.

How can it hurt me?

Asbestos fibers enter the body by the inhalation or ingestion of airborne particles that become embedded in the tissues of the respiratory or digestive systems. The long-term effects associated with asbestos include:

- Asbestosis (an emphysema-like condition).
- Lung cancer.
- Mesothelioma (a cancerous tumor that spreads rapidly in the cells of membranes covering the lungs and body organs).
- Gastrointestinal cancer.
- The symptoms of these diseases generally do not appear for 20 or more years after initial exposure.

How can I protect myself?

There are several methods of controlling exposure to asbestos.

Personal protective equipment - Only respirators that have been approved by NIOSH can be worn.

Protective clothing, such as full bodysuits, gloves, and footwear, must be worn when asbestos fiber concentrations exceed the permissible exposure limit. Contaminated clothing shall be placed and stored in closed containers that prevent dispersion of the asbestos outside the container.

Signs - Listed below is the wording for an asbestos warning:

DANGER, ASBESTOS, CANCER AND LUNG DISEASE HAZARD
AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY
RESPIRATORS AND PROTECTIVE CLOTHING ARE REQUIRED IN THIS AREA

Are state and local government employees protected?

EPA has recently amended the Asbestos Worker Protection Rule and the Asbestos-in-Schools Rule to protect state and local government employees from the health risks of exposure to asbestos. State and local government employees who are performing construction work, custodial work, and automotive brake and clutch repair work are now protected to the same extent as private-sector employees. The Asbestos-in Schools Rule amendments provide coverage for employees of local public education agencies who perform operations, maintenance, and repair activities.