

UNDERSTANDING ASBESTOS

WHAT IS ASBESTOS?

Asbestos is a generic term used to describe a variety of natural mineral fibers. From the early 1930s until the 1970s, manufacturers used asbestos to strengthen products and to provide heat insulation and fire resistance. Asbestos also resists corrosion and is a poor conductor of electricity. Because few products contained all of these properties, asbestos was widely used in the construction of homes, schools, and other buildings.

HOW CAN SOMEONE BE EXPOSED TO ASBESTOS?

Most people are exposed to small amounts of asbestos in their daily lives. However, if materials containing asbestos are disturbed—for example sawed, scraped, or sanded into a powder—fibers are more likely to become airborne and inhaled into the lungs. Asbestos fibers are primarily a respiratory health hazard. Fibers that get into water or food also may be ingested, although they usually pass through the digestive system and do not cause a problem.

HOW CAN ASBESTOS AFFECT HUMAN HEALTH?

Studies of people who were exposed to asbestos for a long time in factories and shipyards show that breathing high levels of asbestos fibers can lead to an increased risk of lung cancer; mesothelioma, a rare but fatal form of cancer in the thin membrane lining of the chest and abdominal cavities; and asbestosis, a serious non-cancerous respiratory disease in which asbestos fibers aggravate and scar lung tissue. The risk of these health problems also increases for tobacco smokers.

WHERE IS ASBESTOS FOUND?

Until the 1970s, many types of building products and insulation materials used in homes contained asbestos, although most products made today do not. The only way to get a positive identification of asbestos is to analyze a sample using a special type of microscope.

If asbestos is discovered in the home, it does not pose a serious problem as long as it remains in good condition. Usually, it is best to leave asbestos material alone. Over time, it may become damaged, either from being disturbed or from age, at which point it is more likely to become airborne and a health hazard.

Common products in the home that might contain asbestos include:

- **Insulation around steam pipes, furnaces, and air ducts** – Asbestos fibers may be released when insulation is damaged or removed improperly.
- **Vinyl floor covering** – Vinyl tiles, the backing on vinyl sheet flooring and adhesives (mastic) used for installing floor covering may become a problem if sanded or scraped during removal.
- **Roof shingles and siding** – These products, if they contain asbestos, are not likely to release asbestos fibers unless sawed or drilled.
- **Soundproofing or decorative material** – If sprayed on walls and ceilings, material that is loose, crumbly, or water-damaged may release fibers. So could material that is sanded, drilled, or scraped.
- Other products that may contain asbestos:
 - ☑ cement sheet, millboard;
 - ☑ door gaskets in furnaces;
 - ☑ patching and joint compounds;
 - ☑ textured paints;
 - ☑ artificial ashes and embers for gas-fired fireplaces;
 - ☑ fireproof gloves, stove-top pads, ironing board covers, and hairdryers; and
 - ☑ automobile brake pads and linings, clutch facings, and gaskets.

HOW DOES PENNSYLVANIA REGULATE ASBESTOS?

Because asbestos in certain forms can cause serious health problems, the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) regulates the removal, collection, transportation, and disposal of asbestos

materials. The DEP Bureau of Air Quality has adopted and enforces the federal asbestos regulations (40 CFR Part 61 Subpart M). DEP does not regulate the removal of asbestos from privately owned homes. However, under the Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry (PA DL&I) Asbestos Occupations Accreditation and Certification Act (Number 1990-194), friable asbestos material disturbed by someone other than the homeowner may be regulated. Contact the PA DL&I at 717-772-3396 for more information. Contact the local municipality to find out about local regulations.

Pennsylvania requires certifications for the following asbestos occupations: contractor, inspector, management planner, project designer, supervisor, and worker. Call PA DL&I at 717-772-3396 for more information about the Asbestos Occupations Accreditation and Certification Act of 1990 (Acts 194 and 161).

ASBESTOS IN SCHOOLS

All nonprofit private and public school administrators, with children in grades one through 12, are required to inspect their buildings for asbestos, develop a plan for controlling the release of asbestos fibers, and maintain asbestos that is in good condition. Questions should be directed to DEP at 717-787-4325.

ENFORCEMENT/COMPLAINTS

If improper asbestos removal or repair projects are suspected, contact the local regional DEP office listed below.

ATTENTION ASBESTOS CONTRACTORS

Asbestos contractors in Pennsylvania must comply with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Asbestos regulations in 40 CFR Part 61 Subpart M. Questions about these regulations may be referred to any DEP regional air quality program office listed below.

The Pennsylvania Asbestos Accreditation and Certification Act (Act 194 and Act 161) requires contractors to be certified and licensed by PA DL&I to perform renovation projects involving asbestos. For more detailed information about these requirements, call 717-772-3396.

Additional regulations exist for demolition and renovation of any building with asbestos-containing material in Philadelphia and Allegheny counties. In Philadelphia County, call Philadelphia Air Management Services at 215-685-7576. In Allegheny County, call the Allegheny County Health Department at 412-578-8038. It is important to contact these offices if the project is located in either of these two counties.

WHERE IS THERE MORE INFORMATION?

1. Call the DEP Bureau of Air Quality in Harrisburg, 717-787-9257. Online information about asbestos can be found at www.dep.pa.gov.
2. Call the Air Quality program at the local DEP regional office:
 - Southeast (Norristown), 484-250-5900
 - South-central (Harrisburg), 717-705-4702
 - Northwest (Meadville), 814-332-6940
 - Southwest (Pittsburgh), 412-442-4174
 - Northeast (Wilkes-Barre), 570-826-2511
 - North-central (Williamsport), 570-327-3638
3. For Allegheny County, call 412-578-8120 for information and special regulations.
4. For Philadelphia County, call 215-685-7576 for information and special regulations.
5. Contact the local municipality to find out if there are any local regulations.
6. The EPA Asbestos Ombudsman, 800-368-5888, has an asbestos information package available to the public.
7. The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, 800-638-2772, will send information about asbestos upon request.
8. The PA DL&I, 717-772-3396, has information about certification requirements for the asbestos disciplines.

The American Lung Association, the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission and EPA provided much of the information included in this fact sheet.

For more information, visit www.dep.pa.gov.