

Asbestos - Be on the Alert!

The Health and Safety Executive's Asbestos Advisory Service and Environmental Health Officers from District Councils will be working in partnership to raise awareness of the legal duty to manage asbestos in premises. Here are a few facts about asbestos...



What is asbestos?

Asbestos is a soft mineral rock consisting of tiny fibres that can be released into the air when asbestos containing materials are cut, sawn, drilled, damaged or deteriorated. If inhaled, asbestos fibres can penetrate deep into the lungs where they can cause disease.

The most common types of asbestos fibre used are chrysotile (white) asbestos which is a serpentine mineral and amosite (brown), and crocidolite (blue) asbestos which are amphibole minerals. The colours are seen in clean fibres and may not be clearly visible when the fibres are mixed with other material.



Is it dangerous?

Asbestos is recognised as the greatest single cause of work-related deaths in Northern Ireland, resulting in approximately 90 deaths each year. Although it is now illegal to use asbestos in the construction and refurbishment of buildings, in the past, it had been used extensively in the building industry where asbestos cement products (corrugated roofing, pipes), thermal insulation and fire proofing were widely employed. Much of this asbestos is still in place in buildings, therefore if not adequately managed it will continue to be an issue for many years to come.

Who is most at risk?

Persons who may inadvertently disturb asbestos containing materials while working in buildings are considered now to be most at risk from exposure to asbestos, for example, electricians, plumbers, maintenance workers, joiners, computer engineers and even cleaners.

How can we reduce the risks?

To prevent exposure to asbestos, persons in control of repairs and maintenance in premises are required by law to identify all asbestos containing materials on their premises, assess the risks from the asbestos containing material and prepare a management plan, implement the plan and to review it regularly. They must also inform anyone intending to carry out work on the building that asbestos is present and that appropriate precautions must be taken.

What must owners of premises do about asbestos?

If you own, occupy or have responsibilities for premises which may contain asbestos, you are required to manage the risk from asbestos by taking the following steps:

- Determine if there is asbestos in the premises, its amount and condition;
- Presume materials contain asbestos, unless you have strong evidence that they do not;
- Make and keep an up to date record of the location and condition of the Asbestos Containing Materials (ACMs) or presumed ACMs in your premises;
- Assess the risk from the materials;
- Prepare a plan that sets out in detail how you are going to manage the risk from the materials;
- Take the steps needed to put your plan into action;
- Review and monitor your plan and the arrangements made to put it in place; and
- Provide information on the location and condition of the material to anyone who is liable to work on or disturb it.

Further information on the regulations regarding the duty to manage asbestos can be obtained by contacting Mrs J Coulter, Ballymena Borough Council, Tel: 028 25 660300 or the Asbestos Advisory Service, Freephone 0800 0320121, Email: asbestos@detini.gsi.gov.uk

Are there any regulations for dealing with asbestos?

Yes. All work activity involving disturbance of asbestos containing material is strictly governed by regulations. There are also Codes of Practice and guidance which describe the most effective ways of dealing with asbestos.

Who can provide help and advice on the regulations for dealing with asbestos?

Details of the law and guidance relating to asbestos management can be obtained from the following sources:

- Local Council Environmental Health Departments
- Asbestos Advisory Service HSE (NI) 83 Ladas Drive Belfast BT6 9FR
Freephone 0800 0320 121
Email: asbestos@detini.gsi.gov.uk
- HSE (NI) website: www.hseni.gov.uk

Frequently Asked Questions

1. Why did they use asbestos in the past?

Asbestos has high tensile strength, flexibility, chemical and heat resistance and good thermal and electrical insulation properties and therefore it was used in buildings, vehicles and domestic and industrial items.

2. Where in my house could I find asbestos?

Typically asbestos can be found in the following areas:

- Eaves gutters and rainwater pipes
- Garage and shed roofs
- Linings for walls, ceilings and doors
- Loose asbestos packing between floors and in partition walls
- Floor tiles
- Central heating flues
- Insulation panels in storage heaters
- Bath panels
- Fire blankets

Asbestos products were widely used in building materials, including insulation and fire protection. Items that may have contained asbestos in the past include:

* Asbestos cement products- used for roofing materials, roof tiles, guttering and soffit boards.

* Insulation board- used for fire protection, thermal and acoustic insulation and can be found internally as partitions, wall linings and ceiling materials.

* PVC flooring and vinyl floor tiles- some products contained asbestos or were backed with asbestos containing paper.

Asbestos is only a risk to health if the fibres become airborne and are breathed into the lungs. Asbestos containing products that are in good condition do not represent a significant risk unless they are damaged or abraded, and should be left undisturbed.

You cannot tell if a product contains asbestos just by looking at it. If you need to work on or around any materials that you think may contain asbestos you should have a sample of the material analysed before you carry out any work.

Taking the sample yourself is not recommended as there is risk of fibre release during the sampling process. You should employ a competent person to take a sample of the material and have it analysed by a UKAS accredited laboratory. If you do take a sample yourself, ensure that the material is dampened (use water with washing-up liquid) and that you do not create dust or allow the spread of the material. Clean up afterwards using a damp rag and include the rag with the sample. Seal the broken edge with paint or other sealant. Contact your chosen laboratory to arrange delivery. There will normally be a charge for this service. You can find details of accredited laboratories on the UKAS website at www.ukas.org/testing.

3. What is the risk to my family's health?

Items that contain asbestos do not represent a significant risk unless they are damaged or abraded, and should be left undisturbed. Asbestos is only a risk to health if the fibres become airborne and are breathed into the lungs.

4. I want to renovate my house, it may contain asbestos - what should I do?

Before carrying out any work you should have a sample of the material analysed, (by a professional) as you can't tell if a product contains asbestos just by looking at it.



The professional will take a sample of the material and have it analysed by a UKAS accredited laboratory. If you do take a sample yourself, ensure that the material is dampened (use water with washing-up liquid) try not to create dust or spread the material. Clean up afterwards using a damp rag and include the rag with the sample. Seal the broken edge with paint or other sealant. Contact your chosen laboratory to arrange delivery. There will normally be a charge for this service. You can find details of accredited laboratories on the UKAS website at www.ukas.org/testing

5. What should I do if I have asbestos in my house?

Actions depend on the type and condition of the asbestos containing material (ACM). Asbestos fibre is safe provided that it remains bonded within the material in which it is used and that the fibre does not become airborne. THERE IS NO DANGER unless fibres are released and inhaled into the lungs.

Generally material in good condition will not release asbestos fibres.

If the ACM is in good condition and unlikely to be disturbed it can be left in place. You should monitor regularly for signs of deterioration.

If the ACM is in poor condition, or becomes damaged, or if you are going to make changes in your home that might disturb it, then you will need to have it repaired or removed.

The person who does this work should be competent to work with asbestos. Contractors must comply with the Control of Asbestos at Work Regulations (NI) 2003. If the work involves asbestos insulation, asbestos insulation board or sprayed coating, the contractor must also be licensed under the Asbestos Licensing Regulations (NI) 1984.

A list of Contractors Licensed to work with asbestos is available on the HSENI website.

6. How do I get rid of asbestos waste?

Asbestos containing material (ACM) are classified as "Hazardous Waste" and must not be disposed of with household waste. Ballymena Borough Council will not collect or dispose of asbestos at this present time.



You will need to refer to the list of approved contractors** or alternatively contact environment and Heritage Service who have registered carriers to collect the material for transportation to a licenced waste disposal site.

Alternatively consult the local commercial telephone directory under "Waste Disposal Services" to arrange collection of the material by a licenced waste carrier. A charge will be made for this service.

Some asbestos removal contractors may undertake disposal of small amounts.

7. How do I find out about Licensed Contractors?

All work involving asbestos insulation, asbestos insulation board and sprayed coating must be carried out by a contractor licensed under the Asbestos Licensing Regulations (NI) 1984, as amended.

HSENI is the licensing authority under these Regulations.

A list of licensed asbestos removal Contractors is available from the Health and Safety Executive, 83 Ladas Drive, Belfast, BT6 9FR. Telephone 028 90243249 or email asbestos@detini.gsi.gov.uk

** Ballymena Borough Council does not specifically recommend any contractor. The list of contractors contained here are those registered to carry out work of this type. Ballymena Borough Council does not guarantee the quality of their work nor take any responsibility for their service.

8. What do I do if I've been exposed to asbestos?

Recently published research suggests that single or low level exposures are very unlikely to lead to disease and the risks with such an exposure are considered "insignificant". Disease associated with asbestos exposure occurs through breathing in asbestos fibre as dust. The chance of developing a disease is related to 2 factors - the amount of fibre inhaled and the duration of exposure. If you think you may have been exposed, you may wish to discuss your concerns with your doctor. At this stage a full medical examination or x-ray would not be beneficial since it takes many years for the effects of asbestos to appear.

If you have been accidentally exposed to asbestos in your place of work, as a result of a fibre release, your employers must investigate the incident and must report it the Health & Safety Executive NI.

If you work with asbestos and your exposure is likely to exceed the action level then your employer is required to ensure that you are under adequate medical surveillance by an Appointed Doctor. This can be arranged through EMAS the Employment Medical Advisory Service Contact No. 028 90 408007 e-mail: emas.hseni@detini.gov.uk.

Your employer has other duties under the Control of Asbestos at Work (NI) Regulations 2003.

Further information can be found in Health and Safety Executive MS13 Asbestos: Medical Guidance Note.

9. What regulations cover work with asbestos?

The Control of Asbestos at Work Regulations [CAWR] (NI) 2003 apply to all work activity with ACM's. The regulations are supported by three 'Approved Codes of Practice and Guidance' (ACOPs):

- *Work with asbestos which does not normally require a license* L27 HSE Books ISBN 0 7176-2562-1.
- *Work with asbestos insulation, asbestos coating and asbestos insulating board* L28 HSE Books ISBN 0 7176-2563-X.
- *The management of asbestos in non-domestic premises* L127 HSE Books ISBN 0 7176 2382 3.



The Approved Codes of Practice give practical advice on how to comply with the Regulations. If you follow the advice, you will be doing enough to comply with the Regulations.

10. Can I reuse asbestos cement?

The Asbestos (Prohibitions) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2000 prohibits the supply of asbestos products. Supply is defined as the sale, lease, hire, hire-purchase, loan, gift or an exchange for a consideration other than money. This means that all forms of asbestos and products which have had asbestos added to them during manufacture, cannot be supplied for re-use.

Where asbestos materials were in place before 2 May 2000 they can remain provided they are in good condition and properly managed.

11. Should I avoid buying a house that contains some asbestos material?

When buying a house, there are many factors you need to consider, including condition, location, price as well as the presence of ACM. There are a number of factors which you should consider:

What type of asbestos product is it?

Where is the asbestos material?

Is it in good repair?

Is it accessible to the occupants?

Can it become damaged?

Can I prevent damage?

Cost of removal and disposal now or in future?

Asbestos cement is considered a low risk material provided that it remains in good condition. The asbestos fibres are tightly bound in the cement matrix and will not be released unless it becomes badly damaged or broken. Other low risk materials include asbestos-containing vinyl floor tiles and textured paint, if they are in good condition.

Sprayed asbestos, thermal insulation on pipe work, asbestos ropes and packing, insulation boards and ceiling tiles all contain a higher percentage of asbestos. The fibres are not as tightly bound in the matrix and there is a higher risk of them becoming airborne, particularly if the material becomes damaged.

Details on asbestos products can be found in Health and Safety Executive Guidance MDHS 100.