

## What You Should Know About Asbestos In Buildings

Extracts from "Safe Buildings Alliance U.S.A."

### Introduction

Concern about the presence of asbestos in buildings, including schools is widespread. Because prolonged exposure to high levels of asbestos has been linked with such diseases as asbestosis, lung cancer and mesothelioma, there appears to be a general public attitude that any asbestos in schools or other buildings represents an immediate threat to human safety.

*Unfortunately, this attitude has often led to hasty, unnecessary and even dangerous asbestos removal activities.*

The "Safe Buildings Alliance" is an incorporated association of manufacturers that previously supplied asbestos containing materials for building construction. Alliance members are aware of and sensitive to the public's concern and need for accurate information on this emotional and often misrepresented issue. Along with other concerned citizens, community leaders and government officials, Alliance members are advocating: -

1. Practical alternatives to the dangerous process of indiscriminate removal of asbestos containing products.
2. Adoption of uniform standards governing abatement of asbestos containing products in buildings, including the determination of acceptable exposure levels.
3. Development of a responsible inspection process to evaluate asbestos in building problems.
4. Establishment of a sensible training and certification program for inspectors and contractors involved in corrective actions.

### Assessing Asbestos In Your Building

#### *What should be done about the asbestos containing materials that may be in your building?*

Most asbestos containing products in buildings will not release substantial numbers of fibres, and risks to occupants will be insignificant. Hasty corrective actions have often been found to increase exposures and have increased risks. Thus, owners of buildings with asbestos containing products should seek expert advice.

#### *When asbestos containing products have been clearly identified, what is the next step?*

Because the mere presence of asbestos containing materials creates no hazard, building owners should determine whether asbestos containing products are releasing fibres. The best way of finding what exposures exist is to monitor airborne asbestos levels. Given the extremely low levels of asbestos typically found in buildings, it is difficult to get accurate air level readings. *Only experts are qualified to make such determinations.*

***What are the most important steps that building managers can take to control asbestos exposure?***

Independent experts believe that in most cases, asbestos exposure can be properly controlled by a combination of minor patching or repairs, improved custodial control and special maintenance procedures. Where small areas of asbestos containing materials have been damaged such that fibre release may be possible, simple patching with readily available commercial compounds will reseal the asbestos fibres. Such procedures can be applied, for example, to cementitious ceiling materials and pipe and boiler instillation.

Easily implemented maintenance procedures are also effective in controlling exposure to asbestos fibres. Custodial personnel should know the location of asbestos containing material and be instructed in the use of wet cleaning and other methods (including proper disposal). In some cases, HEPA vacuum cleaners should be used to properly clean up asbestos fibres.

Building managers also should ensure that maintenance workers, such as electricians or plumbers, do not inadvertently disturb asbestos containing materials and that they use proper work practices when such materials are involved.

Combined with periodic inspection, these simple precautionary measures can simply and inexpensively protect both building occupants and workers from asbestos exposures of concern.

***Are there some circumstances in which custodial control of the asbestos containing material is not the best option?***

In those rare circumstances where airborne fibre concentrates are very high and cannot be lowered by the simple custodial and maintenance procedures discussed, other control techniques may be appropriate. Encapsulation for some products using commercially available sealants or coatings (particularly those studied and recommended by the Battelle Institute in a study sponsored by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency {EPA}) can be an effective control measure, as can enclosure of asbestos containing materials in some circumstances. Removal – the method recommended by most asbestos abatement contractors, should be used as a last resort. There are few qualified who will assure a safe removal and disposal. Also, removal is the most costly method in terms of meeting established EPA and U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) regulatory standards, and most importantly, removal often results in increased fibre release, even when careful work practices are followed.

***Does that mean that removing asbestos containing material is usually more dangerous than maintaining them in place?***

Yes. Many experts believe that removing asbestos containing materials in buildings often does more harm than good. Very recently, the New Jersey Department of the Public Advocate reported that: -

*Improper asbestos removal places workers, building occupants, teachers and especially children at risk of serious health injury. It is well documented that improper removal of asbestos can be far more hazardous than if the asbestos is not removed at all.*

Very few contractors are qualified to conduct removal work properly and the demand for their services, far outweighs the few available qualified contractors. Many independent experts who have studied the situation have found asbestos fibre levels in buildings to be higher after materials were removed than before removal.

The Congressionally chartered National Institute of Building Sciences reached similar conclusions: -

*There is some evidence to indicate that removal of asbestos containing building products from schools and other facilities may be counterproductive. Whether the removal process involves dry*

*or wet disruption of the in-place asbestos, data shows that a substantial quantity becomes resuspended and recirculated throughout the building. Following removal, weeks and sometimes months must pass before ambient air levels of friable (crumbling) asbestos fibre drop below acceptable levels.*

***What are the most important points to remember about asbestos containing products in buildings?***

The mere presence of asbestos containing material in a building is no cause for alarm. Everyone is exposed to asbestos every day from a variety of sources. While high levels of asbestos exposure, such as those experienced by workers years ago, can sometimes lead to serious disease, the low levels found in the ambient atmosphere and in some buildings should not be a cause for concern.

Once an expert laboratory has confirmed the presence of asbestos containing materials, building owners need to obtain qualified independent advice specific to their building. In most cases, a simple and inexpensive program of patching and special custodial and maintenance procedures will keep asbestos levels under control. Removal of asbestos containing materials should be a last resort, primarily because of the high likelihood that asbestos fibre levels will be increased after materials are removed.