

Asbestos – what it means for your business

There has been a lot of talk in the media in recent times about asbestos exposure and buildings, in part due to the demolition of earthquake damaged sites in Christchurch. Even in Wellington it is coming to the fore as buildings are earthquake strengthened.

Although the use of asbestos for new construction has been made illegal in many parts of the world, it is still surprisingly common to find it in older buildings in New Zealand (NZ). Everything from wall cladding, to roofs, to brake discs in some cars can contain asbestos. There are various different types of asbestos, although traditionally some types were thought to be more dangerous than others, it is fair to say none of them are particularly safe.

Asbestos is a naturally occurring mineral which is produced by mining. In the past it has been used for insulation, particularly in boilers and in building materials and some industrial parts.



Asbestos can cause a number of different kinds of diseases. Perhaps the best known are diseases of the lungs, with the most common being pleural plaques. These are patches of scarring on the lining of the lungs. They are a sign that people have been exposed to asbestos but they are not often thought to cause serious disease.

Asbestos can also cause scarring or “fibrosis” of the lungs known as asbestosis. The most worrying effect of asbestos is its ability to cause lung cancer and in particular, a specific type of lung cancer (often seen in media reports) called malignant mesothelioma. This is a cancer of the lining of the lung and sometimes other areas of the body. It is particularly aggressive and often causes death within just a few months.

It is thought the amount of exposure required to cause asbestos related disease has to be quite large. Sometimes a lot of exposure for short periods of time, for example a few months, or a lower level of exposure for many years, can be responsible. With regard to lung cancer, it is believed asbestos has a long “latency”. This means it is often many decades from the time of exposure until the disease develops. The difficulty of course is some people don't remember they have been exposed to asbestos many years before.

Sometimes removing asbestos is more dangerous than leaving alone as the process can liberate large amounts of asbestos dust. If the asbestos can be effectively sealed, the threat can be minimised, so if it can't be removed from a building, sometimes the best advice is to record its presence and then seal it and leave it alone. This might involve new false walls or coatings over the asbestos layers. Once asbestos has been effectively “encapsulated” in this way it is no longer a serious health threat.

In New Zealand asbestos has historically been used in roofing materials. **CONT.**

WELCOME TO OUR WINTER NEWSLETTER



Dr Simon Ryder-Lewis

Welcome to our winter newsletter! We always aim to keep you up to date with the latest developments in Occupational Health and Safety. If you have any questions about the articles here, or if we can help with any issues you have at work, please give us a call.

Our Services

- Individual Work Site Assessment
- Walk through surveys
- Hazard identification and management
- Noise, lighting and air quality (dust) monitoring
- OOS hazard identification and management
- Health and Safety Compliance
- Pre-employment Medical exams
- UKOOA / OGUK exams
- Training for Staff and Management
- Use of personal protective equipment
- Stress and fatigue
- Understanding the HSE Act
- Influenza pandemic planning
- Manual handling
- Health Monitoring
- Work site clinics
- Absenteeism management
- Accident investigation
- Hearing and respiratory testing
- Injury management and rehabilitation
- Gradual return to work programmes
- Influenza vaccinations
- Drug and alcohol testing
- Occupational vaccinations
- Travel medicine
- Healthy Workforce Programme
- Independent Medical Opinions

Asbestos – continued...

Some of these roofs are now 30-40 years old and the substrate holding the roofing material together is starting to break down. Painting over asbestos roofs often an ineffective control measure. An analogy would be painting over a bag of needles. The needles will eventually work their way through the paint, particularly if the roofing material is shaken or moved or the wind blows against it and releases asbestos fibres.

Acid rain can break down roofing materials more quickly, releasing further asbestos. Sometimes liberated asbestos fibres will enter a building through a poorly constructed ceiling, for example in a warehouse.

It can also enter the building by being blown off into the yard and then coming in on vehicle wheels or through open doors.

At some worksites, puddles outside the building have what looks to be a lime scale around their surface or edges - this may be asbestos. When the puddles dry, this asbestos can blow into the air.

Lichen growing on roofs will often pull off asbestos which can then fall to the ground.

Testing for asbestos in the air is very difficult. The fibres must be viewed under a microscope with polarised light. Unfortunately some of them are too small to see, so it is very difficult to get an accurate measurement of the amount of asbestos in the air. In addition, once stirred up, some of the fibres are so small they can remain suspended in the air for many days or weeks.

Work Health Solutions specialises in the monitoring of workers exposed to asbestos. The usual first step is a questionnaire covering a person's asbestos exposure followed by a chest x-ray, a physical examination and an assessment using a machine to measure lung function.

Unfortunately, these assessments are not often able to detect early lung cancers and the research has shown that it is almost impossible to effectively do this. The assessments are aimed more at developing a

baseline which can be used to detect conditions such as asbestosis or may be a reference for the future should the person become unwell. The assessments are also used to monitor the health of those who are actively involved in handling asbestos, such as asbestos removal specialists.

Our office has received anecdotal reports of poor practice in the removal of asbestos. In particular, we are concerned about the practices which have been followed in Christchurch with some of the demolition work following the earthquake.

We have heard reports of buildings containing asbestos being demolished, with little or no regard for the safety of demolition workers. Not only could these workers be exposed if techniques are poor and if inadequate personal protective equipment is provided, but in addition they may return home with asbestos fibres on their clothing – possibly exposing their family and friends.

If you have any questions about asbestos at your place of work, please don't hesitate to contact our office.

cWipes are in NZ

Are you concerned about how to keep your cell phones, tablets, i-pads, PDAs, laptops & PCs etc. clean but have worried about using water to wipe them?

We have found a product which we believe is useful. We have been trying these for a few months and they are really useful and don't kill your electronic devices.

cWipes have been laboratory designed and tested to kill 99.99% of bactericidal activity. cWipes not only clean and disinfect your device, but they dry quickly, leaving your device germ and streak free. We have even managed to wipe off the sticky hand prints of our young child from the TV. Any women with a smart phone is aware of how much makeup gets on these. Easily wiped off with cwipes.

We have a limited number of samples if you would like to try a pack. Just email me at info@workhealthsolutions.co.nz and I will send you one out.

If you would like to order these for your business then please contact sales@cwipes.com or check their website at www.cwipes.com. They are a NZ based supplier.



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