

FACT Sheet

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 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 show that breathing high levels of asbestos fibers for longer periods of time can increase the risk of developing 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. This risk 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 contain asbestos. To identify if asbestos fibers are present in building materials, a small sample of the material is collected and analyzed using a special microscope.

If asbestos is discovered in the home, it does not pose a serious problem if it remains in good condition. Usually, it is best to leave asbestos material undisturbed. Asbestos fibers are more likely to become airborne and a possible health hazard if the material is damaged, either from being disturbed or from age.

Common products in the home that may 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 IS ASBESTOS REGULATED IN PENNSYLVANIA?

Because asbestos, in certain forms, has been determined to cause serious health problems, the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) regulates the removal, collection, transportation, and disposal of asbestos-containing materials (ACM). DEP's Air Quality Program has adopted and enforces the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) 40 CFR Part 61 Subpart M, the Asbestos National Emission Standard for Hazardous Air Pollutants (NESHAP) regulations, as amended on November 20, 1990. Should a project be subject to the NESHAP regulations, a minimum 10-working day notification of the project is required to be made to DEP. The EPA and DEP do not regulate the removal of ACM from single-family residences or apartments with four or less units unless they are part of a group of buildings which are under the control of the same owner-operator.

The Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry (L&I) enforces the Pennsylvania Asbestos Occupations Accreditation and Certification Act of 1990 (Act 194 and Act 161), which requires certification for the following asbestos occupations: contractor, inspector, management planner, project designer, supervisor, and worker. L&I requires a five-day prior notification for friable asbestos of more than three (3) square or linear feet on indoor projects at regulated facilities (including the EPA/DEP exempt private residence when the friable asbestos is removed by someone other than the homeowner). Notifications required by L&I should be submitted to DEP. Contact L&I at CALBOIS@pa.gov or 717-772-3396 for more information regarding Act 194 and Act 161. Contact the municipality where the project is located to find out if there are any local regulations.

ASBESTOS IN SCHOOLS

All public school districts and non-profit schools including charter schools and schools affiliated with religious institutions have regulatory requirements to protect children and school employees from asbestos exposure. These requirements include: 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 [EPA](#).

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. 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 L&I to perform renovation projects involving asbestos. For more detailed information about these requirements, contact L&I at CALBOIS@pa.gov or 717-772-3396.

For questions on demolition and renovation projects located in the City of Philadelphia or Allegheny County call Philadelphia Air Management Services at 215-685-7576, or the Allegheny County Health Department at 412-578-8120.

WHERE IS THERE MORE INFORMATION?

1. Online information about asbestos can be found at: <https://www.pa.gov/agencies/dep/programs-and-services/air/bureau-of-air-quality/business-topics/asbestos.html>
2. Call the Air Quality program at the local DEP regional office:
 - **Southeast Regional Office** – 484-250-5920 (Bucks, Chester, Delaware, and Montgomery counties)
 - **Northeast Regional Office** – 570-826-2511 (Carbon, Lackawanna, Lehigh, Luzerne, Monroe, Northampton, Pike, Schuylkill, Susquehanna, Wayne, and Wyoming counties)
 - **Southcentral Regional Office** – 717-705-4702 (Adams, Bedford, Berks, Blair, Cumberland, Dauphin, Franklin, Fulton, Huntingdon, Juniata, Lancaster, Lebanon, Mifflin, Perry, and York counties)
 - **Northcentral Regional Office** – 570-321-6580 (Bradford, Cameron, Centre, Clearfield, Clinton, Columbia, Lycoming, Montour, Northumberland, Potter, Snyder, Sullivan, Tioga, and Union counties)
 - **Southwest Regional Office** – 412-442-4190 (Beaver, Greene, and Washington counties)
 - **Southwest Regional Office** – 724-925-5428 (Cambria, Fayette, Somerset, and Westmoreland counties)
 - **Northwest Regional Office** – 814-332-6940 (Armstrong, Butler, Clarion, Crawford, Elk, Erie, Forest, Indiana, Jefferson, Lawrence, McKean, Mercer, Venango, and Warren counties)
3. For work done in Philadelphia County, contact Air Management Services at 215-685-7576.
4. For work done in Allegheny County, contact Allegheny County Health Department at 412-578-8120.
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 L&I, at CALBOIS@pa.gov or 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.