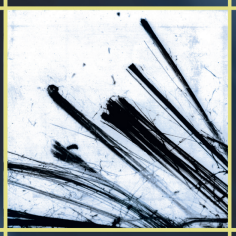
Asbestos Information Sheet

This Information Sheet has been prepared by the Department of Public Works to support implementation of the Queensland Government's Asbestos Management and Control Policy for Government Buildings (July 2006).



About Asbestos

What is Asbestos?

Asbestos is the common term used to describe a naturally-occurring fibrous mineral that was used extensively by Australian industry because of its durability, fire resistance and excellent thermal insulating properties. Asbestos was used in a wide range of products manufactured between the 1940s and the 1980s. Asbestos fibres were an additive often mixed into another base compound (such as cement) to enhance physical properties of the material. In Australia the manufacture and importation of most products containing asbestos were phased out in the 1980s. There is now a national ban prohibiting the manufacture and importation of all asbestos based products.

What is Asbestos Containing Material (ACM)?

The term 'asbestos containing material' refers to any material, object, product or debris that contains asbestos. ACM can take several physical 'forms', depending on its method of manufacture and application. The most common form is asbestos-cement sheet, which was manufactured in various profiles including flat, corrugated and profiled sheets. Other forms of ACM include adhesives, vinyl sheeting and tiles, loose fill insulation, membranes, mastics, woven textiles, sprayed coatings and moulded products.

Within the construction sector, ACM typically covers building materials containing asbestos such as roof sheeting, guttering and downpipes, exterior wall cladding including fascias and eaves, internal wall sheeting, ceiling panels, fire doors and fireproof coatings, and floor coverings such as sheet vinyl flooring and vinyl tiles.

ACM also refers to insulating materials incorporated into building services plant and equipment such as air conditioning heater-bank insulation, lagging on steam and generator exhaust pipes, as well as lining and gaskets in some types of machinery.

What is the risk associated with ACM?

The risk associated with ACM is the inhalation of airborne respirable-sized asbestos fibres. High levels of exposure to these airborne fibres over a prolonged period of time increase the likelihood of asbestos related diseases.

It is important to note that ACM does not present a health risk when it is stable and contained in a bonded form that is maintained in good condition. In fact, many people in society are exposed to minute amounts of airborne asbestos fibres as they go about their daily lives, and do not develop asbestos-related health problems. Since asbestos is a naturally-occurring material very small trace amounts of asbestos fibres are often found in the analysis of the natural 'fresh' air we breathe. (Note, this is referred to as the ambient background level of asbestos).

However, the release of airborne fibres is possible if a material deteriorates to a very poor condition or is disturbed (accidentally or intentionally) without appropriate safety control measures in place. The inappropriate use of high-speed power tools to cut, drill or sand bonded ACM or the incorrect handling of unbonded (friable) ACM, are examples of actions likely to cause fibres to become airborne.

How can the risk be minimised?

Awareness of the potential risks posed by ACM is an important starting point. Avoiding damage to ACM and minimising the release of dust when working with ACM will significantly reduce risk.

Other control measures which will reduce risk include warning signage, labelling and controlling work involving ACM, the mandatory recording of asbestos details in an asbestos register, and the reporting of asbestos related incidents.

The Queensland Government's *Asbestos Management and Control Policy for Government Buildings* requires the progressive removal of high risk ACM, with an overall objective of eventually having asbestos-free workplaces in government controlled buildings.

Queensland Government
Department of Public Works

How is ACM identified, classified and recorded?

ACM, particularly when painted or finished in some other manner, is often difficult for even the experts to identify. The only accurate method to confirm the presence of asbestos is through laboratory testing.

As a result the general position taken is that where the presence of asbestos is suspected, it is presumed to be the case until it is verified, with all precautions consequently taken to avoid accidental exposure.

The Queensland Government maintains a register of known and presumed ACM in government buildings, classified by among other things type, location and condition.

Buildings or other structures built before 1990 are presumed to have been constructed using products and materials that may contain asbestos—unless confirmed otherwise (eg. by sample testing or obvious by visual inspection).

Where can I get further information?

For general information on asbestos contact Workplace Health and Safety Queensland in the Queensland Department of Industrial Relations or at its website (**www.dir.qld.gov.au/workplace**).

For information on asbestos management and control in government buildings visit the Queensland Department of Public Works website (**www.build.qld.gov.au**).