



HEALTH INFORMATION

Inadvertent Exposure to Asbestos

People who believe they may have been exposed to asbestos are understandably anxious and concerned about the possible effects on their health. Many cases of inadvertent, short-term exposure to asbestos will most likely have led to minimal exposure to fibres, with little likelihood of any long-term ill health effects.

Although the type of asbestos involved and duration of exposure may be known, there may be little reliable information about the level of exposure. These are all important factors in determining the level of risk - the more fibres that are released by an asbestos-containing material (ACM), and the longer the work activity lasts, the greater the cumulative exposure to asbestos fibres and, therefore, an increased risk of ill health effects.

Some work activities are more likely to create a significant concentration of asbestos fibres in the air, and therefore, add to the risk if suitable precautions are not in place; for example:

- Use of power tools (to drill, cut etc) on most ACM
- Work that leads to physical disturbance (knocking, breaking, smashing) of an ACM that should only be handled by a licensed contractor eg sprayed coating, lagging, asbestos insulating board (AIB)
- Manually cutting or drilling AIB
- Work involving aggressive physical disturbance of asbestos cement e.g. breaking or smashing

Some asbestos-containing materials release fibres more easily than others.

For detailed information on types of asbestos containing material and the likelihood of fibre release, see:

HSE Asbestos Survey Guide HSG264 Appendix 2 (page 53)

If you are concerned about possible exposure to asbestos from work activities, you are advised to consult your GP and ask for a note to be made in your personal record about possible exposure, including date(s), duration, type of asbestos and likely exposure levels (if known). In some circumstances, your GP may refer you to a specialist in respiratory medicine. HSE does not advocate routine X-rays for people who have had an inadvertent exposure to asbestos. Asbestos-related damage to the lungs takes years to develop and become visible on chest X-rays. X-ray examinations cannot indicate whether or not asbestos fibres have been inhaled.

Further guidance on working with asbestos can be found in the HSE Approved Code of Practice and guidance. This is available to download from the HSE website at:

<http://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/priced/l143.pdf>