

Working with asbestos

According to HSE, asbestos-related disease caused by past exposure to asbestos was responsible for around 4,000 deaths last year, making it the biggest work-related killer in Great Britain



Asbestos is most dangerous to those exposed both to high concentrations and to lower levels over an extended period; it is these exposures that can lead to asbestos-related disease. Depending on the level of exposure and the genetic susceptibility of the individual, Mesothelioma, lung cancer or asbestosis develops as a direct result of the body's inability to break down the fibres.

Risk of exposure depends on the nature of the job and how it is controlled. A one-off, short-duration exposure is unlikely to result in a significant risk of developing mesothelioma, but these workers may be involved in a series of jobs, and therefore receive many short-duration exposures. Because of the current widespread presence of asbestos in buildings, it is envisaged that for the foreseeable future trades-people can continue to come into contact with the material and disturb it, thereby slowly but surely increasing the risk to their health.

REGULATORY CONTROLS FOR NON-DOMESTIC PREMISES

The bringing into force of a 'duty to manage' asbestos by HSE in May 2004 is intended to provide a new level of protection for those within the building related trades with the aim that many thousands of lives will be saved through the effective operation of the regulation. However, it is important that maintenance and repair workers continue to remain aware of the potential of exposure to asbestos fibres,

and request details of asbestos materials before starting work.

In many cases, this information will be available, but where it isn't, there will be a need for an assessment of whether asbestos is present to be undertaken before work is started, or presume that asbestos is present and work accordingly. It needs to be borne in mind that as the regulation does not apply to domestic premises, other than in common areas, it is most unlikely that there will be a prepared record of asbestos.

A key issue in protecting against exposure to asbestos is ensuring that workers have received appropriate training. Regulation 10 of the Control of Asbestos Regulations 2006 places a duty on employers to ensure that adequate information, instruction and training is given to those employees who are liable to be exposed to asbestos, or those who supervise such employees. The level of detail and the range of topics covered are specified in the regulations and need to be relevant to the job and individuals, together with the potential or actual risk of exposure to asbestos.

Those liable to be exposed to asbestos must be aware of the significant findings of the risk assessment.

HSE GUIDANCE AND ADVICE

'Asbestos Essentials task manual – Task guidance sheets for the building and allied trades.' (HSG 210 available from HSE Books). This book tells you where you are most likely to find asbestos and how to protect

"A KEY ISSUE IN PROTECTING AGAINST EXPOSURE TO ASBESTOS IS ENSURING THAT WORKERS HAVE RECEIVED APPROPRIATE TRAINING"

yourself and others. It includes task sheets for common building jobs that may involve asbestos and appropriate working methods. It also tells you what to do if you uncover or damage asbestos materials during work; describes the training needed for anyone who may work on asbestos containing materials; how to use a Type H vacuum cleaner; and information on common procedures.

'Introduction to Asbestos Essentials' (HSG 213) is a companion book aimed at employers, site agents etc.

Individual training needs of employees must be kept under constant review, with refresher training being given at least once a year. The Approved Code of Practice 'Work with materials containing asbestos' (L143) is available from HSE Books. See www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/index.htm

HSE publish a number of booklets and leaflets, some of which are free, explaining the legal requirements and precautions for asbestos work, including the Control of Asbestos at Work Regulations 2002. These publications are available by mail order from HSE Books Tel: 01787 881165, Website: www.hsebooks.co.uk

There is also an information document 'Asbestos risks from domestic gas appliances' (ID HSE 265/49) available from local HSE offices.