Information about Asbestos

Omega Environmental Services

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Your Questions Answered…

This factsheet has been designed to answer any general questions you may have about asbestos, its dangers and what is involved in removing it. If you have a question which is not covered here, please e-mail us using the 'Contact Us' tab provided our website.

What is asbestos?

Asbestos is a mineral which has been mined over the years because of its heat-resistant properties and high tensile strength. There are three principal types of asbestos - chrysotile or white asbestos (the most commonly used type), crocidolite or blue asbestos (often used in sprayed form as insulation), and amosite or brown asbestos (often used in pipe lagging). Crocidolite is generally regarded as the most dangerous of the three. Asbestos is a flexible and durable fibre which can be incorporated into fabrics and different building materials. In some ways, its versatility and cheapness proved its downfall as a material used in construction: it came to be used in applications where its properties were not strictly needed. When its dangers began to be understood, it had already been widely applied.

Why is asbestos so dangerous?

Asbestos was widely used as a heat-resistant building material and an electrical insulator from the 1950s onwards but its dangers were not fully appreciated until the mid-1970s, when asbestosis became recognised as a medical condition. The dust particles in asbestos - which are made up of needle-like crystals work their way across the lung tissue and may pierce the lung to scrape against the chest wall, causing inflammation of the outer lung lining and inside of the lung. Asbestosis can result from minor exposure, for example stripping of old pipe lagging, going back some years. Additionally, exposure to asbestos dust increases greatly the chances of developing lung cancer. Increasing acknowledgment of the dangers of asbestos led to severe curbing of its use in construction and refurbishment from the 1980s onwards and latterly to strict controls on its removal and disposal. Currently around 1.5 million commercial buildings in the UK are believed to contain asbestos materials, quite apart from public buildings such as hospitals or schools.

What materials or appliances are likely to contain asbestos?

This is not an exhaustive list, but these are among the most common sprayed insulation; bitumen felts, mastics & sealants, reinforced plastics, ropes, cloth & yarn, cement products, floor tiles, textured coatings, paper; insulation boards, pipe & boiler lagging. Older domestic appliances such as washing machines, cookers and hair dryers may also contain asbestos, together with fire blankets and ironing boards.

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What are the legal obligations on me as a building owner regarding asbestos?

Removing asbestos from all buildings is impractical and unnecessary, and the legislation recognises this. Instead, there is an obligation on the owner or landlord to survey the buildings for which he has responsibility. The Control of Asbestos at Work Regulations 2012 (CAW 2012) gives specific guidance on who the duty holder is for buildings and how asbestos should be managed. A major priority of the legislation is to prevent the potential accidental contamination of maintenance workers through lack of information. Briefly, the duty holder needs to find out if, where and in what quantities and condition asbestos materials are present within the building. A written plan must then be prepared detailing how the asbestos materials will be managed, which should be implemented, reviewed and updated on a regular basis. All those that need to know; employees, contractors and emergency services should be informed of the plan. Omega Environmental Services can help guide you through your obligations and recommend cost-effective action to ensure that you stay within the law and maintain a safe site.

What should we do if we suspect asbestos has been used in premises we wish to modify or demolish?

The first step is to request a full survey from a qualified specialist like ourselves at Omega Environmental Services. We can advise you on all aspects of the process. The regulatory authorities recognise three types of surveys. A Presumptive Survey involves registering and monitoring the location of asbestos materials within a building but no sampling. A Standard Sampling samples and identifies materials through analysis and is the recognised first step in developing an asbestos management plan. A Pre-Demolition or Major Refurbishment Survey is a full access survey of all materials within the building. This must be undertaken prior to destructive work to prevent the uncontrolled spread of asbestos materials. HSG264, which is published by the Health & Safety Executive, describes the types of survey that can be undertaken.

What is involved in asbestos removal?

Asbestos removal is necessarily one of the most highly legislated services in the UK and an extremely specialised and skilled occupation. Asbestos removal should be carried out only by companies which are licensed and fully qualified to do so. There are penalties if you, as a building owner or landlord, fail to appoint an organisation with the compulsory credential

Amosite

Crocidolite

Chrysotile