

ASBESTOS IN SCHOOLS

There should be records of any asbestos in your school kept within your school. These should be accessible on request. If not, ask why not?

What is asbestos?

Asbestos was a building material used extensively in the U.K. from the 1950s through to the 1990s.

Why is asbestos dangerous?

Serious, often fatal diseases can be caused when asbestos fibres are released from materials, becoming airborne and inhaled. On average, there is a 30–40 year latency period between exposure to asbestos fibres and the onset of disease.

Where is asbestos found in schools?

Many schools, built before 2000, will contain some form of asbestos. Asbestos-containing materials (ACMs) include:

- asbestos lagging used as thermal insulation on pipes and boilers
- sprayed asbestos used for thermal insulation, fire protection, partitioning and ducts
- asbestos-insulating board (AIB) used for fire protection, thermal insulation, partitioning and ducts
- some ceiling tiles
- floor tiles
- cement roofing and guttering
- textured coatings

Schools built after 2000 may have items that have been brought in from outside that may contain asbestos, i.e. items such as ovens which may have been donated.

Who's at risk from asbestos in schools?

The most likely way ACMs will create a risk in schools is when they are disturbed or damaged through maintenance, repair or construction activities.

School caretakers and external contractors could be at risk due to the nature of their work. If asbestos is disturbed during such work, there is a risk that fibres will be released and create risk to others in the school.

Asbestos that is in good condition and unlikely to be damaged or disturbed is not a significant risk to health as long as it is properly managed.

This means that teachers and pupils are unlikely to be at risk in the course of their normal activities. However, they should not undertake activities that damage ACMs, such as pinning or tacking work to insulation board or ceiling tiles.

Who's responsible for managing asbestos in schools?

Responsibility for the maintenance and/or repair of non-domestic premises, including schools, is a 'duty holder' as defined in Regulation 4 of the Control of Asbestos Regulations 2012.

In the majority of schools, the duty holder will be the employer which varies with the type of school. In situations where budgets for building management are delegated to schools by the local authority, the duty to manage asbestos will be shared between schools and the local authority. Both parties will therefore have 'duty holder' responsibilities for the repair and maintenance of the premises.

What is the 'duty to manage' asbestos?

Duty holders should know whether their premises contain asbestos, where it is and what condition it is in. Then they should ensure that they manage it properly.

They must assess and manage the risks from asbestos to employees and others. They must also ensure that anyone who is likely to work on, or disturb, asbestos is provided with information about its location and condition.

What does the duty holder have to do in practice in a school?

The duty holder's responsibilities include:

- keeping an up-to-date record of the location and condition of ACMs in the school
- assessing the risks from any ACMs in the school
- making plans to manage the risks from ACMs in the school
- putting those plans into action

The school's plan needs to contain provisions to ensure that information about the location and condition of ACMs is given to anyone who might disturb these materials.

The duty holder should also ensure that staff who are likely to disturb asbestos are suitably trained.

What is the role of school staff?

Most staff will not be directly involved but still need to be made aware of the potential hazards. All staff should be instructed not to disturb or damage ACMs, for example by pinning work to walls. They should also report damage to school fixtures or fittings that could lead to the release of asbestos fibres, eg damage to ceiling or floor tiles, or to column seals in system-built schools.

Does a school have to close if it thinks it has an asbestos problem?

HSE expects schools to manage the risks from asbestos containing materials (ACMs) on an on-going basis. Temporary closure of a building may be needed where building work has created unforeseen problems – or perhaps led to structural damage.

What is important is that the focus is on preventing exposure in the first place.

Anyone with responsibility for maintenance and repair in schools, or any other work premises, has a legal duty to manage the risks arising from asbestos.

This means taking steps to identify whether asbestos is present in buildings, assessing its condition and managing the risks to ensure that people are not exposed to asbestos fibres.

The school should have sensible plans that are kept up to date and acted upon.

What about pupils – can they damage asbestos?

The likelihood of pupils disturbing asbestos containing materials (ACMs) during unsupervised or unruly activities does need to be considered as part of the schools management arrangements.

Any vulnerable or exposed panels should be identified and protected or removed.

These are the types of issues that should be included in the schools asbestos management plan as they are part of the essential precautions that ensure that normal school activities do not disturb or damage ACMs.

The most likely way that ACMs in schools will be disturbed or damaged is through maintenance, repair or construction activities.

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