

Work **Safe!** Bulletin

ASBESTOS IN SCHOOLS

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Asbestos presents a potential hazard when damage or decay of the surface allows individual fibres to be released into the air we breathe. Measures should be taken to ensure that all sources of asbestos in schools are identified and controlled. The mere presence of asbestos should not cause us to overreact.

The presence of asbestos in the form of thermal insulation on pipes, boilers, and ceilings, fire protection on structural steel beams, or asbestos-containing materials such as ceiling tiles, acoustic spackles, and vinyl asbestos floor tiles, require that certain care be taken when working with or near these materials. Specific procedures and precautions have been developed for each of these cases. The presence of children in schools however adds an extra dimension to the asbestos issue.

The first step in controlling exposure to asbestos is to identify all asbestos-containing materials in the building. An accurate inventory of all asbestos materials in the school should be prepared in consultation with the safety & health committee. The inventory can be completed by combining a walk-through inspection with a study of architectural plans for the building and submitting samples for analytical analysis where necessary to prove or disprove that the material contains asbestos. This inventory should be kept by the principal and maintenance staff in each school and be examined anytime repair work is performed on or near asbestos-containing materials.

The next step is to inspect all asbestos containing material identified from the inventory and determine if any existing damage exists. Care should be taken to ensure that any activity in the area of the asbestos does not damage the asbestos in any way. If the asbestos is already damaged, action should be taken to repair the damage as soon as possible.

In the process of repairing the asbestos damage, an assessment should be performed to determine the most appropriate method of eliminating potential asbestos exposure. The traditional methods of addressing damaged asbestos material include: removal of all or part of the asbestos, sealing the surface of the asbestos (encapsulation), or enclosing the asbestos behind an air tight barrier. Each of these methods has specific advantages and disadvantages, and should be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. Many factors, including the use of the asbestos (thermal insulation, ceiling or floor tile, or acoustical treatment), amount of damage, concentration of asbestos in the material, potential for fibre to be released (friability), and accessibility to contact, will determine what control method should be considered.

It is critical that persons are trained in the necessary steps to be taken when working with or around asbestos. Teachers may only need to know what asbestos is, and that care must be taken not to damage or disturb the material. Maintenance staff who are expected to perform these repairs require much more extensive training. They should receive training before they repair or remove asbestos insulation. The training should also be specific to the task. Untrained staff must not work on asbestos. A number of commercially-sponsored courses on the correct procedures for asbestos repair and removal are available.

Additional information regarding asbestos control options and requirements is available from Workplace Safety and Health.