



Department
for Education

Asbestos management in schools

**Advice for school leaders and governing
bodies in maintained schools, academies
and free schools**

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Summary

About this departmental advice

This is advice from the Department for Education. This advice is non-statutory, and has been produced to help recipients understand their obligations and duties in relation to asbestos management in schools.

Who is this advice for?

This advice is for school leaders, school staff and governing bodies in all maintained schools, academies and free schools.

Key points

Headteachers, school governors, and other members of the school management team all need to know who is responsible for asbestos management procedures and documentation, and for ensuring that this is always followed.

School management teams need to see that maintenance, repair work and improvements on school buildings are carried out safely. This means that:

- staff and visitors know what precautions to follow
- where health and safety functions are delegated, staff are appropriately trained and clear lines of accountability are established
- all work on buildings is carried out only after consulting the documentation on asbestos
- any work likely to affect asbestos-containing materials is carried out by a qualified person, after consultation with those who have duty-holder responsibilities, such as the employer, the governing body, or the building owner

You can review how your school is performing on asbestos management by using the [Health and Safety Executive \(HSE\) checklist](#) available on the HSE website.

What asbestos is and when it becomes a risk

Asbestos is a natural mineral material with a fibrous structure. Before the health effects of its fibres were fully understood, asbestos was considered a valuable building material as it had high strength and fire resistance. It was extensively used in schools for fire protection and insulation.

Asbestos can be found in Victorian schools, system-built, or traditionally constructed buildings and in schools that were refurbished before its use was banned in 1999.

More than 14,000 schools were built between 1945 and 1975 when the use of asbestos was at its height, and many others were refurbished. More than three quarters of schools have some buildings that contain asbestos.

Types of asbestos and where it might be found

Products that contained asbestos ranged from mastics, fillers and decorating products through to wallboards and ceiling tiles. Three forms were commonly used. They were: blue (crocidolite), brown (amosite) and white (chrysotile) asbestos.

It is not possible to distinguish between them by eye, and they can occur together. Although white asbestos is less harmful than blue or brown, all are carcinogenic.

When asbestos becomes a risk

Asbestos fibres only become a risk to human health when they are released into the air and breathed in.

The types of maintenance, repair work and improvements that might disturb asbestos include:

- installation of new ICT equipment and cables
- window replacements
- alterations to classroom structure and installing display equipment
- refurbishment projects

Asbestos fibres can also be released through vandalism or accidental damage, or as materials deteriorate as they age.

Where asbestos is found in school buildings

Asbestos fibres are released more easily from softer materials. The following asbestos-containing materials are commonly found in school buildings.

Thermal insulation

Asbestos insulation products were commonly used in boilers, and in hot water and heating pipe work, for example, asbestos insulation for boilers and pipework in boiler-rooms, underground ducts, and service risers within buildings.



Loose asbestos materials

Used in mattresses and quilts around boilers and as thermal and acoustic insulation in roof spaces and floor voids. They were also used as thermal insulation in kilns, electric storage heaters and cooking ranges. Loose fill is made up of pure asbestos and if disturbed can release large amounts of fibres into the air.

Sprayed coatings

Used mainly for fire protection and insulation, they consist of a high percentage of asbestos usually mixed with a cement binder, applied to beams, columns, ceilings and the underside of floors. They typically provided fire protection to steelwork and concrete structures in more industrial type buildings and in steel frame buildings. Asbestos fibres can be easily released from sprayed coatings.



Asbestos insulating board

Wall panelling and partitions may be made of asbestos insulating board cement or a material with an asbestos paper lining. Asbestos insulating board was extensively used in the construction of schools due to its low cost and ease of use. Asbestos insulating board looks similar to plasterboard and can crumble easily if damaged.

Asbestos insulating board packing can be found around steel columns and beams for fire protection of steel framed buildings (ie system-built premises such as CLASP and SCOLA). Ceiling tiles can also be made from asbestos insulating board.

Asbestos insulating board was often used for heat resistant surfaces in laboratories, kitchens and fire escape corridors. Warm air cabinet heaters and fume cupboards were typically lined with it, and window and door surrounds are often made from asbestos insulating board.

Fire resistant boards behind electrical distribution boards are often made of asbestos insulating board. Fuse holders of this era often contain fibrous or woven asbestos. Flash guards within switchboards are often asbestos composites.



Paper and felt

Asbestos paper can be found as a facing layer under non-asbestos thermal insulation on pipework and was included as a facing on roofing felt.

Woven asbestos products

These include textiles, ropes and yarns. The most common applications found in schools are asbestos fabric cavity fire barriers in ceiling voids and gaskets on boilers and pipework. If frayed or damaged, asbestos fibres can be easily released.

Cement products

Many educational buildings contain asbestos cement in roofing sheets, boiler flues, external window panels and in many other places. Asbestos cement wall and roofing sheets are also common on garages, storage sheds and ancillary buildings. Gutters, soffits and shelves can also be made of asbestos cement.



Reinforced plastics

PVC floor tiles and resin composites, such as bakelite, can contain asbestos. These are typically found in old toilet cisterns and toilet seats; window sills and stair nosings; partitioning; and electrical switchboards, socket outlets and electrical fittings. If materials are broken or worn they can release asbestos fibres.



Bitumen, resins and mastics

Bitumen mastics and adhesives were used for floor tiles and wall coverings, adhesives in floors and roofs, roofing felts, damp proof courses and bedding for sinks. Textured coatings such as Artex are found as decorative finishes to corridor walls and ceilings.



Second World War gas masks

Gas masks from the Second World War period potentially contain asbestos.

The HSE advice is that it does not think it appropriate for children or teachers to wear or handle a gas mask unless it can be clearly demonstrated that the particular mask does not contain asbestos.

Diseases related to asbestos exposure

Asbestos-related diseases (mainly lung cancer and mesothelioma) are the most common cause of death from occupational disease in the UK.

When asbestos-containing materials are disturbed or damaged, fibres can be released into the air. Breathing in asbestos fibres can lead to a number of dangerous diseases, although a slight exposure is unlikely to cause disease. People who are exposed to asbestos can develop the diseases years later. This is known as the latency period, where the symptoms of the disease are seen a long time after the initial exposure.

Most deaths now are the legacy of the widespread exposure to asbestos, before its use was finally banned. Those most at risk today are people who regularly disturb asbestos, like tradespeople. Working on or near damaged asbestos-containing materials, or breathing in high levels of asbestos fibres, increases the chances of getting an asbestos-related disease. However there is no threshold exposure below which there is no risk, and all exposures are cumulative.

There are three potentially fatal asbestos-related diseases. It can take less than 15 years to more than 60 years from first exposure for symptoms to develop.

- mesothelioma is a cancer of the cells which make up the membrane that covers the outer surface of most organs. It usually starts in the lining of the lungs
- lung cancer usually requires a greater exposure than mesothelioma. If asbestos exposure has occurred then the risk of developing lung cancer is greatly increased if a person smokes
- asbestosis leads to a scarring of the lung tissue and is a disease that usually progresses slowly. Asbestosis requires a large exposure to asbestos and is rare in people who have worked in schools. People with asbestosis have an increased risk of developing lung cancer and mesothelioma

Activities that can accidentally disturb asbestos

If you are responsible for school buildings that might contain asbestos, you need to identify where it is, its type and its condition. You need to assess the risks, and manage and control those risks.

If this is not done, asbestos-containing materials could be disturbed or damaged and fibres released into the air. Precautions must be taken to ensure that tradespeople don't put themselves or others at risk by disturbing asbestos.

Examples of activities that have disturbed asbestos in schools causing accidental exposure include:

- a caretaker who regularly swept the school boiler room, unaware that the dust was contaminated with asbestos
- teachers who stored materials in a cupboard lined with asbestos-containing materials which became damaged over time, increasing the risk of exposure to fibres. The damage was not reported and was only discovered some time later when a survey was carried out
- a contractor drilled through a ceiling into asbestos insulation boards. The contractor was unaware of the presence of asbestos as he had been shown straight to the work area without reference to the asbestos register
- a group of pupils playing football inside damaged the ceiling with the ball, releasing asbestos dust from the roof void

Asbestos: the legislative framework

The Health and Safety at Work Act 1974 requires employers to protect their employees at work. In schools, it also requires that 'pupils, visitors and all other persons are protected from harm to their health and safety from known or foreseeable risks so far as is reasonably practicable'.

The Control of Asbestos Regulations 2012 places specific duties on those who manage non-domestic premises to identify the presence of asbestos-containing materials, and manage the risks they present.

The Control of Asbestos Regulations 2012 also places duties on contractors, for example to protect their employees.

If you are responsible for the maintenance, repair or improvement of school premises, or of equipment that uses asbestos-containing materials, you will have responsibilities under the duty to manage asbestos.

Dutyholder responsibilities

In a school the duty to manage responsibilities includes:

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

Those most at risk of disturbing asbestos-containing materials and breathing in the fibres are tradespeople and caretakers.

However, if fibres are released because work is not properly managed, the staff and pupils in a school could be exposed.

Other activities could also lead to accidental exposure. The school must have arrangements in place to ensure that information about the location and condition of asbestos-containing materials is given to anyone who might disturb these materials, including caretakers, contractors, support staff and teachers.

All parties in the school management chain have a part to play in securing the effective management of asbestos in school premises.

These management arrangements must also be effective during school closure periods when school staff presence is minimal.

Who is the dutyholder?

Anyone who has responsibility for the maintenance or repair of non-domestic premises, including schools, is a dutyholder as defined in Regulation 4 of the Control of Asbestos Regulations 2012. For most schools, the main dutyholder will be the employer, with dutyholder responsibilities in some schools also being shared with the person responsible for the site.

The local authority is the employer for community schools, community special schools, voluntary-controlled schools, maintained nursery schools and pupil referral units.

The governing body is the employer for academies, free schools, voluntary-aided and foundation schools.

For independent schools, the employer may be the proprietor, governors or trustees.

Where budgets for building management are delegated to schools, for example by an LA or academy trust, the duty to manage asbestos will be shared between the schools and the LA or trust.

Dutyholder responsibilities are often established via an explicit funding agreement/contract. The extent of the duty depends on the nature of the agreement and responsibilities for repairs and maintenance, as distinct from capital expenditure.

In the case of LAs, a written scheme for the financing of maintained schools will set out the categories of work that will either be financed from the delegated school budget share (revenue repairs and maintenance) or remain the responsibility of the LA (capital expenditure). Both parties will then have dutyholder responsibilities for the repair and maintenance of the premises.

Where the duty is shared, cooperation and communication between all parties is key to the effective management of asbestos-containing materials.

Asbestos records and plans

Before arranging any work on the school premises dutyholders will need to refer to documented information on asbestos that should already be available. These records include a survey, a register and a management plan. These documents need active management to make sure that they are kept up to date.

Asbestos survey

An asbestos survey conducted by a qualified asbestos surveyor is an effective way to help you manage asbestos in your premises. The survey should look in all accessible places, including above the ceilings and in floor ducting. A proper survey provides accurate information about the extent, type and location of asbestos and the condition it is in so that risks can be assessed and priorities set. It is recommended that you arrange a survey if you suspect there are asbestos-containing materials in your premises.

There are two types of survey:

- management surveys are undertaken to help manage asbestos-containing materials during the normal occupation and use of premises
- refurbishment surveys are required where the premises, or part of them, need upgrading, refurbishing or demolishing; or when any work is carried out that might disturb hidden asbestos that had not been previously identified

The use of accredited or certificated surveyors is recommended.

Asbestos register

The asbestos register is a document derived from the asbestos survey. It records where asbestos is located or where there might be asbestos in a shorter more accessible format than the asbestos survey. If areas have not been accessed during surveys, it has to be assumed that asbestos is present unless there is strong evidence that there is not.

Asbestos management plan

The management plan contains current information about the presence and condition of any asbestos in the building. It should set out and include:

- who is responsible for managing asbestos
- the asbestos register
- the schedule for monitoring the condition of materials
- communicating your decisions

The plan should be written specifically for your school and set out in detail how the risks from asbestos-containing materials will be managed.

Asbestos training

Under the Control of Asbestos Regulations 2012 information, instruction and training is required for anyone whose work could foreseeably expose them to asbestos, and those who supervise them.

This includes staff and maintenance people who may become exposed to asbestos while carrying out their normal everyday work, such as entering boiler rooms and plant rooms where asbestos is present, or changing light fittings in asbestos-tiled ceilings, or who may come into contact with or damage asbestos materials within the building fabric.

Any training needs to be appropriate for the work and the roles undertaken by individuals.

- asbestos awareness training is for people who are liable to disturb asbestos while carrying out their normal everyday work, and for those who manage them. This will include caretakers and maintenance staff, and could include building managers, bursars and heads. Taking an asbestos awareness training course does not mean that an individual can work on asbestos materials
- workers who intend to remove or carry out work with non-licensed materials such as asbestos cement, asbestos gaskets, and asbestos floor tiles, must have additional training in the type of work being undertaken
- higher risk materials including asbestos insulation, asbestos coatings and asbestos insulation board must only be repaired or removed by HSE licensed contractors

Most school staff are not directly involved in managing the buildings or in carrying out repair or maintenance work. Staff still need to be aware of the potential hazards. All staff should be instructed not to disturb or damage asbestos-containing materials, for example, by allowing work to be pinned to walls. They should also report damage to school fixtures or fittings that could lead to the release of asbestos fibres, for example, damage to ceiling or floor tiles, or to column seals in system-built schools.

Consequences of not complying with asbestos regulations

Failure to comply with the Control of Asbestos Regulations 2012 is a criminal offence. The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) investigates incidents where dutyholders fail to manage the risks and takes enforcement action where appropriate.

The following case studies outline some of the consequences that have ensued when dutyholders either failed to seek competent advice or ignored advice in the procurement of minor works – leading to contractors, and others, being exposed to risks.

Unsafe removal led to exposure, prosecution and fines

The unsafe removal of asbestos insulation boards at a large independent school led to several people being exposed to asbestos fibres.

HSE prosecuted the school and the director of the company responsible for the refurbishment project, after an investigation found they had failed to identify and prevent the risk of asbestos exposure.

The HSE investigation found that over an 18-month period, from the initial design stages through to the construction work, there was inadequate planning and a failure to carry out a full asbestos survey. This was despite the fact that a sample taken from the building had identified the presence of asbestos.

The school was fined £60,000 and ordered to pay £13,000 in costs. The director was fined £10,000 with costs of £6,000.

Negligence and civil law

Under the common law, organisations have a duty of care to others who may be affected by their activities. Individuals have sued for damages using the civil law when they were injured as a result of another person's negligence.

A local authority was required to pay £250,000 to a victim's family for negligence in asbestos management many years previously, when the victim was a pupil at a local authority school.

Costs of decontamination

The financial consequences of having to carry out decontamination can be extreme, and there can be a negative impact on pupils' education.

In one school, a lab technician installed an IT cable through a ceiling void, putting holes through fire barriers and walls, and contaminating the majority of ceiling voids throughout the building. It was nine months before the exposure was spotted by a surveyor. The clean-up required new ceilings and lighting to be installed, and cost £280,000.

Another school arranged an electrical re-wiring over the summer. On observing the contractors with unsealed bags of asbestos waste, the school's site manager contacted an experienced asbestos consultant. Asbestos contamination had spread throughout the school, affecting everything from computers to test tubes, files and records and pupils' coursework.

At the start of the autumn term, 1000 pupils had to be found temporary accommodation; the school did not reopen until the following summer term. The school and council incurred costs of £4.54m as a direct result of the contamination. The HSE prosecuted the contractor.

Asbestos - what to do if things go wrong

If something goes wrong and you find you have been exposed to asbestos fibres, or you damage asbestos-containing materials you should:

- stop work immediately
- get advice from an asbestos expert about decontamination of people and premises, and take necessary remedial action
- ensure that staff and pupils are not able to access the area and do not remove any personal possessions
- unless the incident is very minor, notify the HSE

People who have been exposed to asbestos are understandably anxious about the possible effects on their health. A slight exposure is unlikely to cause asbestos disease but the risks are greater for prolonged or high levels of exposure.

Although the type of asbestos involved and duration of exposure may be known, there may be little reliable information about the level of exposure. If staff, pupils, or their parents, are concerned about their exposure they should be advised to consult their GP.

They should ask for a note to be made in their medical record, including dates, duration, type of asbestos and likely exposure levels if known. HSE does not recommend an x-ray as they cannot indicate whether or not asbestos fibres have been inhaled.

Asbestos – importance of collaboration

Day-to-day operational lead for health and safety is normally delegated to the senior management team, who have a key role in making sure risks are managed effectively within their school - particularly when any work is undertaken that may damage or disturb asbestos.

Good communication between the management team and staff is critical to managing the risks, whether the work involves identifying and reporting damage, undertaking minor building repairs, or overseeing major refurbishment.

When any work is carried out on school buildings, collaboration between the school and contractors is vital. Particular attention must be given to ensuring that contractors are aware of known and presumed locations of asbestos and that effective lines of communication between the school and those responsible for the contractors are maintained throughout the work.

Further sources of information

Associated resources

- [HSE website](#)
- [HSE asbestos checklist](#)
- [HSE asbestos checklist frequently asked questions](#)
- [HSE asbestos advice](#)
- [HSE video: an asbestos victim's story](#)
- [HSE video: consequences of asbestos exposure](#)
- [HSE video: Christopher Morgan talks about mesothelioma](#)
- [Asbestos, Safety Health and Environmental eLearning Association](#)
- [The Independent School Bursars' Association](#)
- [National Association of School Business Management](#)
- [National Association of Headteachers](#)
- [Joint Union Asbestos Committee](#)
- [TUC](#)
- [United Kingdom Accreditation Service](#)
- [UK Asbestos Training Association](#)
- [Asbestos Testing and Consultancy Association](#)
- [Independent Asbestos Training Providers](#)
- [NATAS](#)

Other departmental advice you may be interested in

- [Advice on health and safety for schools](#)

Other departmental resources

- [Display Energy Certificates and monitoring school energy consumption](#)
- [Area guidelines for schools - BB82](#)
- [Ventilation and indoor air quality in schools - BB101](#)
- [Property Data Survey Programme](#)
- [The department's response to Common Sense, Common Safety](#)



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