

Asbestos FAQ

What is Asbestos?

Asbestos is a generic term for six different naturally occurring mineral formations which have the common characteristic of their crystalline structure being able to be separated into long, thin fibers. The fibers can be curved (serpentine asbestos, or chrysotile) or straight, “needle-like” fibers (the amphiboles). Chrysotile is the most common type of asbestos in the United States and has been mined in various locations in the United States. Asbestos fibers are present in the air throughout the United States. This is partly due to fibers broken from exposed asbestos containing rocks, but more has been released from asbestos-containing products, such as vehicle brakes.

Asbestos was called the “miracle mineral” due to its many unique physical properties. Asbestos was added to many building materials because of its ability to retard fire, strengthen products and acoustically insulate.

Asbestos use in building materials peaked in the years following World War II through the 1970s. Asbestos may still be found in new buildings. Asbestos is currently regulated by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), the EPA and other government agencies.

Is Asbestos Hazardous?

It is the unique physical shape of asbestos that gave it many practical applications and also makes asbestos hazardous. Asbestos is harmful if the fibers become airborne and are inhaled. Fibrous asbestos can fracture into fibers small enough that they can penetrate deep into the lungs, where they can interact with the body to cause cancer or other illnesses. Asbestos Containing Materials (ACM) that are intact and in good condition are not hazardous to building occupants under normal conditions.

How Can Asbestos Harm You?

Microscopically small asbestos fibers can be inhaled deep into the lungs and lodge there. After many years, lung cancer or mesothelioma (cancer of the mesothelium) may develop. If you inhale large quantities of asbestos over several years, you could develop asbestosis, which progressively makes breathing more difficult, or develop pleural plaques, which make it difficult to evaluate lung X-rays. If you swallow large amounts of asbestos, some studies show there may be an increased risk of developing cancers in different organs associated with the throat and gastro-intestinal tract.

Wasn't Asbestos Banned Years Ago?

Only a few asbestos products are actually banned in the United States. You can still easily buy many asbestos products. The University is minimizing procurement of asbestos products as

much as possible. However, we cannot guarantee that new building materials on campus are asbestos-free. Many items purchased or installed before 1980 contain asbestos.

How Can I Tell If Something Contains Asbestos?

It is not possible to visually determine if a material contains asbestos. The presence of asbestos can only be determined by specific sampling and analytical procedures conducted by qualified individuals.

What is Asbestos Good For?

Due to their mineralogical properties of having high strength, being an excellent insulator for heat and electricity, being able to resist heat without damage, being fairly good at resisting corrosion, and also having the ability to be woven into fabric, asbestos has been added to many different materials commonly used in buildings and different products. It can be found in literally thousands of types of products from building fireproofing to hand-held hair dryers.

Is there Asbestos at the University?

Yes. Asbestos was used during the construction of buildings throughout the 1970s and before. Many buildings on campus are known to have asbestos-containing building materials in good physical condition. Hundreds of asbestos removal projects have been conducted at the University in conjunction with remodeling and demolition activities. As long as ACM remains on campus, the University will monitor the condition and safe removal of asbestos.

Additional Info:

Exposure to asbestos can be a serious health risk if asbestos-containing material is disturbed in such a way that the particles and fibers become airborne. Symptoms of asbestos-related diseases, such as shortness of breath, coughing and chest pain, often do not appear until 20 to 50 years after exposure.

Breathing asbestos mainly causes problems in the lungs and the membrane that surrounds the lungs, including:

- **Asbestosis:** Scarring of lung tissue that causes breathing problems, usually in workers exposed to asbestos in workplaces before the federal government began regulating asbestos use in the mid-1970s.
- **Pleural plaques:** Scarring in the inner surface of the ribcage and area surrounding the lungs that can cause breathing problems, though usually not as serious as asbestosis. People living in areas with high environmental levels of asbestos, as well as workers, can develop pleural plaques.
- **Cancer:** The two types of cancer caused by exposure to asbestos are lung cancer and mesothelioma, a cancer of the thin lining surrounding the lung (pleural membrane) or abdominal cavity (the peritoneum). Mesothelioma is a rare form of cancer usually caused by asbestos exposure.