

Managing Asbestos in the Workplace – FAQ

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This frequently asked questions (FAQ) on managing asbestos in the workplace can be used for training and risk-assessment purposes. It includes details on asbestos risks, surveys, construction work, retrofits and how asbestos may be managed in the future.

Note: this document is for guidance only, and further professional advice may be required for specific workplace issues.



Asbestos warning sign

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1. What is Asbestos?

Asbestos-containing materials were used extensively in buildings between the 1900s and up to 2000 for insulation, fire resistance and many other purposes. There are three main types of asbestos of significance in Ireland, including crocidolite (blue asbestos), amosite (brown asbestos) and chrysotile (white asbestos).

2. What is the risk?

Asbestos is a carcinogen and exposure can cause occupational cancers, including asbestosis and mesothelioma, which only become apparent many years after the exposure. The risk posed by asbestos depends on the type of asbestos, the percentage concentration, the condition of the material and its potential to release fibres into the air. Damaged, degraded and cut asbestos-containing materials can release fibres into the air, which potentially can be inhaled.

3. Is all asbestos the same in terms of risk ?

No, it depends on the type of asbestos and its potential to release inhalable fibres (friability). The risk from crocidolite (blue) and amosite (brown) asbestos is greater than that from white asbestos. Examples of asbestos which easily release fibres after mild abrasion include sprayed coatings, laggings, insulation board, vinyl flooring backed with asbestos paper, gaskets. Non-friable asbestos includes asbestos bitumen roofing, unbacked vinyl and vinyl floor tiles and textured decorative coatings.

4. Where is it found?

Commonly found asbestos-containing materials can be located in domestic and commercial properties. These include roof slates (which can contain 10-15% asbestos), thermal insulation to boilers and pipework (contains 15-85% asbestos), floor tiles, asbestos insulation boards, sprayed coatings and many more.

5. What age buildings are most likely to have asbestos?

Buildings built before the year 2000 have a higher probability of having asbestos.

6. What if there is doubt as to whether asbestos is present?

The legislation requires that if there is doubt as to whether asbestos is present, it should be assumed that it is present, and the requirements for asbestos-containing materials applied.

7. When is a risk assessment required?

If there is a risk of employees being exposed to asbestos dust from asbestos or asbestos-containing materials, a risk assessment should be completed, i.e., during maintenance, plumbing or electrical

works, retrofitting, refurbishment, demolition work and in particular for specialist contractors involved in the removal of asbestos.

8. What is the current occupational exposure limit value (OELV) for asbestos?

The OELV is the maximum concentration of asbestos fibres in the air to which workers may be exposed, over an eight-hour period. Currently it is 0.1 fibres cm³ as an eight-hour time-weighted average. There are proposals to introduce a more stringent limit.

9. What should be in an asbestos risk assessment?

As specified in section 8 of the 2010 Asbestos Regulations, it should include the type, the condition, the risk, the nature and degree of exposure which may occur during planned work, and the effects of current or proposed control measures. Air monitoring to measure the fibres in the air, and medical surveillance is relevant for workers involved in asbestos removal.

10. What are the duties of employers, owners, contractors and contracting authorities with regard to asbestos surveys before commissioning work?

The update of Directive 2009/148/EC, on the protection of workers from the risks related to exposure to asbestos at work, emphasises that employers, owners, contractors and contracting authorities that commission work should be required to carry out an asbestos assessment/survey before the start of any work in buildings, ships, aircraft, or products. This includes premises which were built before the year 2000, when it was banned in Ireland. The assessment/survey should be completed by a qualified and certified operator, with a report including details on the presence or absence of asbestos, fibre type, location and quantities.

11. What types of asbestos surveys are there?

A management asbestos survey is completed to manage asbestos-containing materials during the normal occupation and use of the building.

A refurbishment survey is required where the premises, or part of it, needs upgrading, refurbishment or demolition. Refer to Section 8 of the HSA's Asbestos-Containing Materials in Workplaces Guidelines.

12. When is the best time to do an asbestos survey?

Prior to any works commencing, to prevent other persons being exposed to asbestos fibres during works.

13. Can asbestos-containing materials be left in place?

Currently the asbestos regulations say that asbestos that is in good condition, well-protected and unlikely to be disturbed can be left in place. However, it should be noted that asbestos can deteriorate over time and regular checks by a competent person should be completed on its condition. There is also a proposal for a European Strategy for the removal of all asbestos-containing materials from buildings, which may have significant implications on how asbestos is managed in the workplace, and is relevant to buildings being retrofitted.

14. What is required in relation to asbestos for construction/demolition/maintenance activities?

Before starting works, it must be identified if asbestos is present, which is done in the asbestos survey. It is important that the survey includes all areas where the work is to be completed. The surveyor should be informed of the areas where work is to be done.

The results of the survey should be included in the tender document for the project and communicated to all relevant parties, including the Project Supervisor Construction Stage (PSCS). The preliminary health and safety plan completed by the Project Supervisor Design Stage (PSDP), must include details of any particular risk at the premises, including asbestos.

The asbestos should be removed (if required to do so) prior to the commencement of other works on the site, by a competent asbestos removal contractor. A clearance certificate must be issued by an independent competent analyst once they confirm that the asbestos removal has been completed satisfactorily, prior to the area being reoccupied for demolition or other work.

15. Does the HSA have to be notified about asbestos-containing materials?

The regulations require that an employer shall not carry on an activity which would expose or would be liable to expose an employee to dust from asbestos materials in excess of the limit value of 0.1 fibres per cm³, unless they have prepared a written notification, and submitted it to the HSA not less than 14 days before starting the works. An example of this is when a specialist asbestos removal contractor has been engaged to remove high risk asbestos, a notification form and plan of work is submitted to the HSA by email at asbestos.notif@hsa.ie or by post.

16. What are the training requirements for employees who are likely to be exposed to asbestos?

The training requirements depends on the type of asbestos and the type of work. For example, basic asbestos awareness training is appropriate for persons who could potentially disturb asbestos containing materials during the course of their work, such as plumbers, electricians, engineers and architects. The HSA have an online asbestos safety course available at <https://hsalearning.ie/mod/page/view.php?id=262>.

17. What training is needed for low-risk asbestos removal contractors?

In addition to basic awareness training, persons who will intentionally disturb low-risk asbestos-containing materials i.e., asbestos cement, textured coatings, should receive additional training specific to the risks of the asbestos. This includes roofers, carpenters and demolition operatives removing asbestos cement.

18. What are the training and other requirements for high-risk specialist asbestos removal contractors?

Specialist removal contractors are needed, when there is higher risk asbestos present, such as asbestos insulation board and asbestos coatings. This will be identified in the asbestos survey, by a competent asbestos surveyor. When a specialist removal contractor is engaged, they have to have additional measures in place, including up-to-date training records based on theory and practical training, face-fit certificates for the respiratory protection to be worn during the removal works, evidence of medical examinations of their removal workers, test certificates for all plant and equipment used (vacuum units, decontamination units, negative pressure units), air monitoring/sampling records completed during the removal, and a detailed plan of work outlining how the removal is to be done safely. Other requirements also apply, and are subject to inspection and enforcement by the HSA.

19. What do employers need to plan for, in relation to proposals to implement a European Strategy for the removal of all asbestos?

Employers need to be aware that recommendations have been made at European Parliament level to have all asbestos-containing materials removed from buildings, regardless of its condition, or the type of asbestos. This is a change from existing regulations, which allow asbestos which is in good condition, and undisturbed, to remain in place, once monitored regularly. It also recommends that the repair, maintenance, encapsulation, or sealing of asbestos only leads to the postponement of removal, which adds to the risk level for workers and inhabitants, suggesting that these measures may no longer be appropriate in the future.

20. How should the asbestos risk be managed in relation to retrofitting and energy upgrading of buildings?

Directive (EU) 2018/844 of the European Parliament and of the Council Amending Directive 2010/31/EU, on the energy performance of buildings, is calling to have asbestos surveys completed prior to energy renovation works, and selling or renting out a building. Proposals have been made that mandatory asbestos surveys, and removal of asbestos, is completed before any renovation works start.

21. What is the most relevant legislation and guidance?

- Safety, Health and Welfare at Work (Exposure to Asbestos) (Amendment) Regulations 2010, (SI 589 of 2010), link: <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2010/si/589/made/en/print>
- Safety, Health and Welfare at Work (Exposure to Asbestos) Regulations 2006, (SI 386 of 2006), link: <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2006/si/386/made/en/print>
- The HSA's Practical Guidelines on Asbestos-Containing Materials (ACM) in Workplaces, link: <https://tinyurl.com/ys6ap8pj>
- Safety, Health and Welfare at Work (Construction) Regulations 2013, link: <https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2010/si/589/made/en/print>
- European Parliament resolution of 20 October 2021 with recommendations to the Commission on protecting workers from asbestos (2019/2182 (INL)), link https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2021-0427_EN.html