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### Asbestos FAQ

#### **Q: What is asbestos?**

**A:** Asbestos is a mineral that is mined, in a manner similar to other minerals such as iron, lead, and copper. There are many varieties of asbestos: the three most common are chrysotile, amosite, and crocidolite. Unlike most minerals, which turn into dust particles when crushed, asbestos breaks up into fine fibers that are too small to be seen by the human eye. Often, individual fibers are mixed with a material that binds them together, producing asbestos containing material (ACM).

#### **Q: How long has asbestos been in use?**

**A:** Asbestos was first used in the United States in the early 1900's, to insulate steam engines. After World War II, and for the next thirty years, people who constructed and renovated schools and other public buildings used asbestos and asbestos-containing materials (ACM) extensively. ACM's were used primarily to fireproof, insulate, soundproof, and decorate buildings. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) estimates there are ACM's in most of the nation's approximately 107,000 primary and secondary schools, and 733,000 public and commercial buildings.

#### **Q: How many products contain asbestos?**

**A:** One study estimated that 3,000 different types of commercial products once contained asbestos. The amount of asbestos in each product varied from as little as one percent to as much as 100 percent. Many older plastics, paper products, brake linings, floor tiles and textile products contain asbestos, as do many heavy industrial products such as sealants, cement pipe, cement sheets, and insulation. The law now prohibits the manufacture, processing and importation of most asbestos products.

#### **Q: Why was asbestos so widely used?**

**A:** Manufacturers and builders found asbestos useful for a variety of reasons. It is strong yet flexible, and it will not burn. It conducts electricity poorly, but insulates effectively. It also resists corrosion. Few other available substances have all of these qualities.

#### **Q: How are people exposed to asbestos?**

**A:** When asbestos fibers are in the air, people may inhale them. Because asbestos fibers are small and light, they can stay in the air for a long time, and are not easily detected. People whose work brings them into contact with asbestos -- workers who renovate buildings with asbestos in them, for example -- may inhale fibers that are in the air. This is called occupational exposure. Workers' families may inhale asbestos fibers released by clothes that have been in contact with ACM. This is called paraoccupational exposure. People who live or work near asbestos-related operations may inhale asbestos fibers that have been released into the air. This is called neighborhood exposure.

#### **Q: What is mesothelioma?**

**A:** Mesothelioma is a disease in which cells in the lining of the chest or abdominal cavities become abnormal and divide without control or order. They can invade and damage nearby tissues and organs. Cancer cells can also metastasize (spread) from their original site to other parts of the body. Working with asbestos is the main risk factor for mesothelioma. A history of asbestos exposure at work is reported in about 70 percent to 80 percent of all cases.

#### **Q: Are there any OSHA standards that cover workers exposed to asbestos as part of their jobs?**

**A:** Yes. The Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) has three standards to protect workers from exposure to asbestos in the workplace: one regulates construction work, including alteration, repair, renovation, and demolition of structures containing asbestos; another covers asbestos exposure during work in shipyards; and the third applies to asbestos exposure in general industry, such as exposure during brake and clutch repair, custodial work, and manufacture of asbestos-containing products.

#### **Q: Do current OSHA standards require employers to provide education and training for employees exposed to asbestos?**

**A:** Yes. In the construction and shipyard industries, employers must provide education and training for employees exposed

above a permissible asbestos exposure limit (PEL), and for all employees involved in certain identified work classifications. In general industry, employers must provide training to all employees exposed above PEL's. Employers must also provide asbestos awareness training to employees who perform housekeeping operations covered by OSHA standards. Employers must place warning labels on all asbestos products, containers, and installed construction materials when feasible.

**Q: What if OSHA regulations do not apply to my workplace?**

**A:** The Environmental Protection Agency's "Worker Protection Rule" extends standards implemented by the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) to state and local employees who perform asbestos work, and who are not covered by OSHA Asbestos Standards or a state OSHA plan. The Worker Protection Rule parallels OSHA requirements and covers medical examinations, air monitoring and reporting, protective equipment, work practices, and record keeping. In addition, many state and local agencies have more stringent standards than those required by the federal government.

**Q: Is there a medical test that will show whether I've been exposed to asbestos?**

**A:** Chest x-rays cannot show asbestos fibers, but can detect early signs of certain lung diseases. Other tests, such as lung function tests and high resolution CT scans, can also detect changes in the lungs caused by asbestos. These changes usually are not detectable until years after exposure.

**Q: How can I identify materials that contain asbestos?**

**A:** Unless a material is labeled, it is difficult to determine whether it contains asbestos simply by looking at it. If you have any doubts about the material, you should treat it as if it contains asbestos, or have it sampled and analyzed by a qualified professional. A professional should take samples for analysis, because there may be an increased health risk if fibers are released.

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