



# Environmental Update #8

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## Understanding the Potential Environmental Hazards of Asbestos

### What is asbestos?

Asbestos is a name for a group of six naturally occurring fibrous minerals found in certain types of rock formations. Asbestos fibers are strong, flexible, won't burn, resist corrosion, and insulate well. These qualities made asbestos popular as an additive in a variety of building materials until the 1970s.

### How can asbestos affect my health?

Known asbestos-related diseases include asbestosis, lung cancer, and mesothelioma. No short term, or acute effects, are associated with asbestos exposure. The latency period between asbestos exposure and the development of an asbestos-related illness is typically 20 years or more. In general, the more asbestos fibers people inhale, the greater their risk of developing an asbestos-related disease. Most victims of severe asbestos-related illness have worked in industries such as shipbuilding, mining, milling, and fabrication, where they were chronically exposed to very high levels of asbestos in the air without the protections now afforded by law. Many of these same workers were also smokers. Smoking significantly increases one's susceptibility to an asbestos-related illness.



*Asbestos insulation on a water pipe.*

### What types of building materials may contain asbestos?

- Pipe insulation
- Spray-on fireproofing
- Resilient floor tiles (vinyl asbestos, asphalt, and rubber)
- The backing on vinyl sheet flooring and adhesives
- Soundproofing or decorative material sprayed on walls and ceilings
- Joint compounds for walls and ceilings
- Textured paints; and
- Cement roofing, shingles, and siding

### How does exposure occur?

The mere presence of asbestos-containing building materials (ACBM) does not necessarily constitute a health hazard. An individual must inhale asbestos fibers to develop an asbestos-related disease. Asbestos-containing building materials are classified as either "friable" or "non-friable." The term "friable" means that the materials are capable of being crumbled, pulverized, or reduced to a powder by hand pressure. Friable ACBM may be inhaled and is associated with the potential for exposure.

Non-friable building materials, such as vinyl tile, can be made friable through activities such as grinding, sanding, or drilling. Intact and undisturbed ACM in good condition is not likely to release asbestos fibers into the air and does not pose a health risk. Removal of intact ACM in good condition is not recommended unless a renovation or demolition is planned. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) recommends in-place management of intact and undisturbed ACM. Such a management program must include procedures for eliminating or minimizing the release of asbestos fibers into a building. In addition, the program should require that any intentional disturbance of suspect ACM be performed by professionals.

### **How can materials containing asbestos be identified?**

You can't tell whether a material contains asbestos simply by visual observation, unless the material is labeled. If in doubt, treat the material as if it contains asbestos or have it sampled and analyzed by a qualified professional. Professionals should take samples for analysis, since they know what to look for and there may be an increased health risk if fibers are released. Incorrect sampling can be more hazardous than leaving the material alone. *Taking samples yourself is not recommended.* If you choose to take the samples yourself, take care not to release asbestos fibers into the air or onto yourself.

### **For more information**

Additional information on asbestos can be found on the EPA web site at [www.epa.gov/asbestos](http://www.epa.gov/asbestos).