



# Labour

## HAZARD ALERT

### Asbestos

#### Background

Asbestos is a mineral that can be crumbled, pulverized or powdered when it is dry (friable) and will result in small fibres and clumps of fibres being released into the air. Inhaling airborne asbestos fibres poses a serious health concern and can cause:

- asbestosis (a disease that involves scarring of the lungs and makes breathing difficult);
- mesothelioma (cancer of the lining of the chest or stomach cavity); or
- lung cancer.

Many factors will determine how the exposure to asbestos will affect an individual such as the dose, duration, source, type of asbestos, and pre-existing health condition or smoking history (Smoking is considered to create a synergistic response with asbestos exposure. In other words, while both can cause lung cancer alone, together they increase the likelihood of it by more than double.). It is important to remember that it can take decades after the first exposure to asbestos fibres for the related cancer to develop.

Before 1990, asbestos was mainly used for insulating buildings and homes against cold weather, noise, and for fireproofing. If your work place was built before 1990, it is likely it contains some form of asbestos. Asbestos-containing material may be found sealed behind walls and floorboards, in the attic, or tightly bound in the original product (i.e. insulation around pipes). Exposure to airborne asbestos fibres will not occur if the asbestos-containing material is left undisturbed.

Currently, some building materials that contain asbestos in a non-friable form (not easily broken/crumble in to small pieces), such roofing shingles, house siding, and cement, are allowed to be used in new housing and small building construction by the National Building

Code of Canada (NBC). The Canada Occupational Health and Safety Regulations reference the NBC for the construction or renovation of a building.

## Hazards

It takes very little asbestos to create a hazard. Working with or in proximity of friable asbestos-containing material can cause exposures that are dangerous to life and health. Examples include, but are not limited to:

- disturbing or removing insulation that contains asbestos, including insulation around hot water pipes and tanks;
- some vehicle parts contain asbestos. In some cases, you can be exposed to asbestos dust when changing your brakes or replacing a transmission clutch;
- breaking, cutting, drilling, abrading, grinding, sanding or vibrating non-friable asbestos-containing material; and
- removing all or part of a false ceiling to obtain access to a work area in cases where asbestos-containing material may be lying on the surface of the false ceiling.

## Eliminating and Controlling the Hazard

A proper hazardous substance assessment by a qualified person must be used to determine the presence of any asbestos and the risks of the asbestos being disturbed (friable vs non-friable). This is especially important before entering an attic or crawl space and/or performing any types of renovation. The simple act of cutting / drilling asbestos-containing material may lead to asbestos fibres being released.

**\*\*\* Only a qualified person with training and experience in working with asbestos should handle or remove asbestos containing materials and only in a controlled environment.**

## Legislative Requirements

Employers must protect the health and safety of employees by preventing them from inhaling or coming into contact with asbestos fibres. To that end they must:

- have a qualified person conduct a hazard investigation wherever there is a likelihood of asbestos exposure;
  - consult a physician if the qualified person report calls for it;
  - identify and maintain a record of all asbestos-containing material in the work place; and
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- ensure that safe work procedures are followed and controls implemented to prevent exposure to airborne asbestos fibres.

The following parts of the Canada Occupational Health and Safety Regulations (COHSR) contain requirements for working with or near asbestos:

- [Part II, Permanent Structures](#) (e.g. References to the National Building Code);
- [Part X, Hazardous Substances](#) (e.g. Definition, hazard investigation, record of hazards, control of hazards, employee training, and ventilation); and
- [Part XII, Safety Materials, Equipment, Devices and Clothing](#) (e.g. Respiratory protection and employee training).

Additional Resources:

For further information, please contact the ESDC Labour Program office at 1-800-641-4049. The [Labour Program website](#) provides information on occupational health and safety topics such as: [Right to Know](#), [Right to refuse dangerous work](#), and [Health and Safety Committees](#).

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