



Information Sheet

Short Term Exposure to Asbestos

Occasionally, the Department of Health and Environmental Control (DHEC) receives questions concerning the potential for short term exposure to asbestos. This document is intended to explain the potential exposure risk and associated health hazards regarding non-occupational, incidental exposure to airborne asbestos fibers.

What is Asbestos?

Asbestos is a group of naturally occurring fibrous minerals. Historically, because of its excellent heat resisting properties, asbestos-containing material was used as insulation, fire-proofing, building materials (roofing shingles, ceiling and floor tiles), friction products (automobile clutch, brake and transmission parts) as well as in some gaskets, fabrics and coatings. In order for asbestos to cause health affects in people, it is first necessary for fibers to become airborne, and then inhaled. According to the federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, because of its varied uses, we are all exposed to low levels of asbestos in the air we breathe.

How can Asbestos affect my health?

Undisturbed asbestos does not pose any health risk. Asbestos is not a short-term or acute health hazard. Short-term exposure to asbestos that has been disturbed should not pose significant risk to health. Chronic or long-term exposure to asbestos fibers is known to cause injury to the lungs and is also recognized to cause both lung cancer and cancer of the lining of the lungs (mesothelioma). Asbestos related diseases are most commonly found in workers exposed to asbestos at much higher levels and over a much longer time period than the general public. Smokers and people with compromised airway clearance conditions such as Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease, Emphysema, Cystic Fibrosis or Asthma are at increased risk of health problems associated with asbestos exposure. Cigarette smoking and exposure to asbestos together significantly increase the risk of getting lung cancer.

What should I do if I have clothes that have been potentially exposed to asbestos?

Simply wash the clothes in regular soap and water to remove any asbestos-containing materials.

How can I get rid of asbestos that may be on my belongings after a fire?

Simply use soap and water to wash any visible dust or soot from them. If you retrieved clothes, wash them as well to eliminate any further potential for exposure. Note that when asbestos containing material is wet, then it is not producing airborne fibers (which is how asbestos becomes hazardous to people).

How can I tell if there is asbestos in debris that I have come in contact with?

There is not a visual method for identifying asbestos-containing material with certainty. Fibers must be examined in a certified lab under a microscope in order to be identified as asbestos.

If I have handled debris, should I go to the doctor for tests?

No, as long as you experienced a short duration of potential exposure to asbestos-containing material. However, if you are concerned about your health, seek advice from your normal health care provider.

Could this make other existing medical conditions, like Asthma, worse?

As long as exposure to asbestos was short in duration, we do not anticipate that this would contribute to any problems with existing medical conditions. However, if you are concerned, we encourage you to talk with your health care provider.

Should I be worried that short term exposure to airborne asbestos fibers could make me sick in years to come?

It is extremely unlikely in situations where exposure to airborne asbestos fibers was for a short duration. If the area(s) entered and/or materials recovered were wet, the likelihood of potential inhalation exposure is even further minimized. Also, if the asbestos fibers are a part of a hard surface, like floor tiles, exposures of concern are limited to physically breaking up the tiles or sanding or using other abrasive processes while the tiles are dry.

What protective equipment will the workers who are cleaning up asbestos containing debris be required to wear?

Occupational regulations govern the training and personal protective equipment that is required for workers to handle known or suspected asbestos-containing materials. At a minimum, these workers will wear some variation of a coated paper suit, boots, gloves and a half face respirator with HEPA cartridges.

For additional information about asbestos, please visit the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control web site (www.scdhec.gov/asbestos) or contact Marc McKenna at 803-898-4270.