

Asbestos in the classroom (DRAFT)

Under the Workers Compensation Act employers are responsible for ensuring the health and safety of all their employees. This includes the obligation to make workers aware of all known or reasonably foreseeable health and safety hazards in their workplace. One such risk that teachers need to be aware of is the possible presence of asbestos in their classrooms and schools.

Asbestos is the name given to a group of minerals that occur naturally in the environment as bundles of fibers. These fibers have a unique quality that allows them to be separated into thin durable threads. The resulting products are highly resistant to heat, fire and chemicals. For these reasons, asbestos has been used widely in many industries including construction. However, asbestos also has a dark history related to the fact that its fibres can break down into microscopic particles that cannot be detected by the human eye. These particles can become airborne and easily enter the lungs. The extreme health risks of inhaling these fibers have been well documented for at least half a century. These risks have resulted in the use of asbestos being banned in more than 40 countries worldwide. These countries include all member states of the European Union, Australia, Japan, and South Africa. In spite of this fact, it is still found in the physical plants, vinyl flooring, ceiling tiles, plaster, insulation, wall coverings and drywall tape of many of our schools.

The threat from asbestos is real. The World Health Organization's latest estimate notes that asbestos already claims 107,000 lives a year. Even that conservative estimate means that every five minutes around the clock a person dies of asbestos related disease. Asbestos-related illnesses are also among the most common causes of occupational death in British Columbia and Canada. In 2007, WorkSafe BC accepted 139 claims for fatal benefits. Of those, 59 or 42% were related to asbestos exposure. The true toll is far higher, as agency statistics only cover workers who have filed compensation claims.

As well as being ideally suited for multiple commercial uses, asbestos is also the "perfect carcinogen" as it acts as both a promoter and initiator of cancer. Exposure to asbestos has been linked to several diseases including asbestosis, lung cancer and mesothelioma. All of these diseases can have a latency period of up to thirty or more years. Asbestos fibres are dangerous when inhaled and the dustiest processes are, in general, the most hazardous. Although it is clear that the health risks from asbestos exposure increase with heavier exposure and longer exposure time, investigators have found asbestos-related diseases in individuals with only brief exposures. This is especially the case with the fatal disease mesothelioma, a formerly rare, but increasingly common cancer of the lung cavity. It's generally accepted by medical authorities around the world that no level of asbestos exposure can be considered safe, and that the more exposure one has, the greater the risk.

Because asbestos is classified as a hazardous material WorkSafe BC has developed an extensive set of requirements that employers must meet to protect their workers from exposure. These requirements apply to any worksite where asbestos-containing materials

are present or used. Therefore, every school district in British Columbia is required by law to have an Asbestos Management Program that requires:

1. An up-to-date inventory of asbestos-containing materials (ACM) in all school district buildings. This inventory must detail the location, type and percentage of asbestos present, the condition of the material and the potential for worker exposure. This inventory must be present at the site and available to any worker at that site.
2. That all asbestos-containing materials are clearly identified.
3. Inspection of all asbestos containing material identified in the inventory on a regular basis. The purpose of this inspection is to monitor the condition of identified materials and to ensure that it remains in good condition and is not likely to release fibers into the air.
4. Conduct a risk assessment prior to the disturbance, repair, or removal of asbestos-containing materials. This assessment must be sent to WorkSafeBC a minimum of 24 hours prior to the commencement of work.
5. Instruct workers in safe work procedures and the elements of the Asbestos management program.
6. Keep accurate and complete records and annual review and update them.

In addition to implementing an asbestos management program, employers must ensure that all friable (materials that can be easily crumbled when dry and become airborne) are either removed from the workplace, encapsulated, or enclosed. The employer is also required to substitute material less hazardous than asbestos when practicable. If such substitution is not practicable, the employer must document the reasons why and make this documentation available to workers and the joint committee

What can you do to ensure that you and your students are not being exposed to this hazard? Ask to see the inventory for your school. Every classroom should be clearly identified and assessed. If the inventory is not readily available notify your administrator and your school safety or staff rep immediately. If the inventory shows asbestos containing material in your room that is damaged or in any way can be disturbed insist through your safety committee that it be removed.

If something doesn't look right

Must report to supervisor

Must investigate

Investigations should involve the joint committee