

ASSESSING AND REMOVING ASBESTOS CEMENT

Introduction

Asbestos products have been proven to have the potential to cause cancers of the chest and lungs, but asbestos only poses a risk to health if the fibres are released into the air and breathed in. There is no cure for asbestos-related diseases, but as long as asbestos is in good condition and is not being or going to be disturbed or damaged there is no risk and the asbestos should be left alone.

What am I looking for?

All types of asbestos are dangerous, but the materials that contain greater percentages of asbestos and have the higher potential fibre release pose the most risk. Higher risk materials include sprayed asbestos, asbestos lagging, asbestos insulation board and similar materials (this includes all white, brown and blue asbestos). Work with asbestos cement poses a lower risk, but precautions still have to be taken.

What should I do?

The first step is to make sure that you have correctly identified that the material is asbestos cement. Asbestos cement is usually found as a profiled or flat sheet: it has been used for roofing, rainwater pipes, flue pipes, cisterns and sumps. It was also used for drinking water supply pipes and for sewage and drainage pipes. Any such item supplied before 1983 could contain asbestos. Modern alternatives look similar but are asbestos-free. Unless you have confirmed that there is no asbestos by sending a sample for analysis, you should assume that asbestos is present in this type of product.

Some types of asbestos insulation board look very similar to asbestos cement products: these products pose a higher risk and are covered in separate HSWI guidance, "Assessing and removing asbestos: sprayed asbestos, lagging and insulation board". These materials can only be removed by specialist contractors. Details of specialist companies who can assist in surveying properties, analysing samples and removing asbestos can be found in that guidance.

Can I leave asbestos cement in place?

Yes, if the asbestos cement is in good condition and is unlikely to be disturbed or damaged it is usually safer to leave it and make sure that any asbestos materials are clearly identified in plans and records. You will need to alert anyone who might disturb the material in future and may wish to consider marking materials with the asbestos warning sign. You should also be aware that the material is extremely fragile and easily damaged. This causes an additional risk when the product is used for roofing, where falls through the sheets are common and can be fatal.

Can I remove asbestos cement?

Yes, if the material has been identified as asbestos cement it can be removed without employing specialist contractors by using the following precautions.

- Make sure everyone knows they are working with asbestos.
- Keep the material wet whilst working on it: this reduces dust release.
- Provide workers with disposable overalls, suitable gloves, and a disposable mask (respirator type FFP3).
- Avoid using power tools or breaking the asbestos products: try to remove the product in one piece.
- Where asbestos sheets have to be cut or drilled for removal, wet them thoroughly, then scribe and break sheets. If this is not possible, use hand tools, preferably in the open air.
- Carry material to the ground: do not drop it.
- Always follow appropriate safety precautions for work at height.
- Keep the site clean and tidy at all times and clean up after work by dampening any dust and carefully placing it in a polythene bag for disposal (see below).

What about maintenance?

If you cannot avoid cleaning asbestos cement sheets, only clean by washing with surface biocides. Do not use scrapers, wire brushes or pressure washers.

It is not illegal to re-use existing asbestos cement products, but you will need to follow the safe working practices given above. It is far safer to replace any damaged items with non-asbestos alternatives.

Disposing of asbestos

Any asbestos material should be double-wrapped in polythene or placed in a covered skip. Asbestos cement can only be disposed of at Wright's Tip East, the Point of Ayre landfill: please do not leave any at Civic Amenity sites. You will need to contact the Waste Operations Management Unit on 686535 to arrange for disposal: a minimum of 3 days notice is normally required. For advice on other environmental matters or fly-tipped material, contact the Environmental Protection Unit on 685896.

Further advice

There is a large range of guidance available on asbestos. The publications of the Construction Industry Training Board and Health and Safety Executive in the UK are recommended. Further guidance on Isle of Man health and safety legislation and advice on good site practice is available from the Health and Safety at Work Inspectorate, Murray House, Mount Havelock, Douglas IM1 2SF, tel: 685952, e-mail WorkSafe@dlge.gov.im or from our website at www.gov.im/dlge.

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