

Why is asbestos dangerous?

Breathing in asbestos fibres can lead to asbestos-related diseases. These are mainly cancers of the chest and lungs and they kill more people than any other single work-related cause. There is a long delay between first exposure to asbestos and the start of disease. This can vary between 15 and 60 years. The vast majority of people now dying from asbestos-related diseases were exposed to asbestos during the 1950s and 1960s. But of course people in the asbestos stripping industry still work with it today. Workers in the building maintenance and refurbishment trade may also come across it frequently.

The Control of Asbestos at Work Regulations 2002 require your employer - and self-employed workers - to do all they reasonably can to prevent, or, where this is not possible, to keep to a minimum, employees' exposure to asbestos.

How much asbestos would I need to breathe in to develop an asbestos-related disease?

Nobody knows. ***But we do know the more asbestos fibres you breathe in, the greater the risk to your health.*** That is why it is important that everyone who works with asbestos should take the strictest precautions to reduce the amount of asbestos fibres in the workplace. In many situations you will also need to use respiratory protective equipment (RPE).

What is RPE?

RPE is the name given to various face masks, hoods and helmets which you can wear to protect your lungs from asbestos.

When do I need to wear RPE?

The law requires that your employer **must** try to prevent your exposure to asbestos. If this is not possible, they must reduce your exposure to asbestos as far as they reasonably can. This might include wearing RPE. But your employer **must always** provide you with suitable RPE if you are working in an area where the amount of asbestos in the air is greater than the control limits laid down in the Control of Asbestos at Work Regulations. The RPE should reduce the asbestos you breathe in to a concentration as low as is reasonably practicable and to below the control limits.

Does it matter what type of RPE I wear?

YES. The type of RPE you need will depend on the amount of asbestos in the air and the type of job you are doing. Your employer **must** make sure you have the right type for the work you are doing and that it fits you properly. For instance half mask dust respirators are not suitable for asbestos stripping work.

What else must my employer do?

Your employer must:

- do all they reasonably can to keep the amount of asbestos in the air to a minimum before they provide you with RPE;
- train you how to fit and use your RPE properly;
- carry out tests to make sure that your face mask fits you properly;
- make sure training is updated and that refresher training is given;
- make sure the RPE you use is in good working order, properly cleaned and looked after.

What else can I do to protect my health?

- Always use the equipment (eg a vacuum cleaner) your employer provides to reduce the amount of asbestos dust in the air.
- Always wear the RPE your employer gives you.
- ***Never take off your RPE in a contaminated area - not even for a minute.***
- Make sure your RPE fits you properly - if it doesn't fit properly it doesn't work properly and your health and life will be put at risk.

If you have a beard, sideburns or even a visible growth of stubble or if you wear glasses, certain types of RPE may not fit you properly: the stubble, glasses etc will leave small gaps where the mask should be sealed tightly to your face. To make sure that the facepiece protects you as well as it

can, your employer should make sure you have a face fit test before you use it. If you are worried that your RPE doesn't fit you properly ask your employer or safety representative, if you have one.

- Never misuse your RPE, eg do not loosen the straps, cut parts of the face seal or make gaps in the seal to make it more comfortable.
- If you think your RPE isn't working properly, leave the contaminated area immediately and tell your employer.
- If you have not been given RPE and you think you might need it, or you are worried that you don't have the right RPE for the job, speak to your employer or safety representative. Don't take risks with your health and life.
- The risk of cancer from asbestos is higher among smokers. If you smoke, you can reduce the risk to your health by stopping.

Choosing suitable RPE is your employer's responsibility, but if you want more information on RPE, ask for our leaflet *Selection of suitable respiratory protective equipment for work with asbestos*, or ask your health and safety representative if there is one.

ASBESTOS DUST KILLS

Taking off your RPE in a contaminated area puts you at risk. Don't do it - EVER.

More information

Asbestos alert for building maintenance, repair and refurbishment workers: Be aware of asbestos the hidden killer Pocket card INDG188

HSE Books 1995 (single copy free or priced packs of 25 ISBN 0 7176 1209 0)

Selection of suitable respiratory protective equipment for work with asbestos Leaflet INDG288(rev1) HSE Books 2003 (single copy free or priced packs of 5 ISBN 0 7176 2220 7)

Working with asbestos in buildings Leaflet INDG289 HSE Books 1999 (single copy free or priced packs of 10 ISBN 0 7176 1697 5)

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This leaflet is available in priced packs of 20, ISBN 0 7176 1696 7

This leaflet contains notes on good practice which are not compulsory but which you may find helpful in considering what you need to do.

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INDG255(rev1) 9/03 C400
Printed and published by the Health and Safety Executive



ASBESTOS DUST KILLS



KEEP YOUR MASK ON

Guidance for employees on wearing respiratory protective equipment for work with asbestos