

ASBESTOS IN SCHOOLS

How to Check your Schools Asbestos Management

Actions after an Asbestos Incident

If the plan is effective the asbestos will be safely managed but even in the best run schools asbestos could be damaged and the management plan should describe what actions to take. This section summarises those actions.

Plan should have a record of Incidents

If asbestos fibres are released in any quantity other than in very minor amounts a record should be kept of what happened and who might have breathed in the fibres. It is difficult to define minor amounts but damage that can be seen such as a hole or scratch that has penetrated the surface can release fibres. It is sensible to veer on the side of caution and make a record.

Contingency plan in the event of damage

The plan should cover the action to take if asbestos is damaged. Any damage should be recorded and repaired. An assessment should be made after any incident to investigate why the incident took place and what measures have to be taken to prevent a similar incident happening in the future

A record should be made in the person's medical record. The incident should be recorded in the management plan, along with the names of the people who were likely to have breathed in any fibres. They should be given prompt and reasoned advice giving a scale of the risk and advising them to contact their GP and record the incident in their medical records.

The plan should cover informing people after an incident

If asbestos has been damaged then it is probable that asbestos fibres will be released. The management plan should detail what actions the school intends to take to inform people after such an incident. A balance must be made between causing anxiety unnecessarily and informing people of the potential dangers.

Be careful if the HSE gives advice after the incident suggesting that you should not tell people unless the level of exposure has exceeded the "Action Level". This is a technical term, described in detail in ["Asbestos Policy Suggested Improvements"](#). It is a very high level and is designed for asbestos contractors working on asbestos wearing masks and protective overalls. It should not apply to teachers, ancillary workers and children in a school. The 2006 Control of Asbestos regulations no longer refer to "Action levels," although HSE Head of Asbestos Policy has stated that HSE inspectors are still instructed to advise that people should not be told of their exposure in a school unless the level exceeds the Action Level. Perhaps you might be told that as the level was beneath the "Control Level/Limit" then there is no risk. This is equally incorrect as once again this level is for asbestos contractors wearing masks and protective clothing, and is a dangerous level particularly for children. The 2006 regulations include an ill defined term "sporadic and low intensity," and hence you might be told that the asbestos fibre release was sporadic and low intensity and was therefore safe. Do not accept that either unless comprehensive air sampling has been carried out, and all the results are below the Clearance Level.

Insist that air sampling is carried out by specialist contractors with disturbance that simulates every day activities. This should involve vigorous dusting of surfaces and floors. If the results are at or above the Clearance Level/Indicator then the room cannot be legally occupied (0.01f/ml), for HSE state that it is not a safe permanent level. In addition the specialists should carry out dust sampling of surfaces to detect whether there is asbestos fibre contamination on surfaces. If those are not clear, or the airborne fibre levels are at or above the Clearance level then the rooms should not be occupied. The rooms should be environmentally cleaned by specialists and further air and dust samples should be undertaken on completion of the work. Only when the source of fibre release has been prevented and all the tests are clear can the rooms be occupied once again.

Because the Clearance level is not an acceptable permanent level, if the results are just below it then further tests should be carried out, with disturbance, a few days later to check that fibre levels have reduced to a level well below it. If they have not then the source of fibre release should be determined and remedial actions taken.

Informing -

HSE Medical Branch advice is: *"Even when it is not possible to determine whether an exposure was significant or not entry in the medical record is recommended"*.

The Issues

When people should be told. Our proposal. A single hole from a drawing pin probably would not warrant informing people unless there is concern, in which case they can be correctly told that there is almost no risk to their health. If however there are lots of holes from drawing pins, compasses or ball point pens then the fact should be recorded, the damage should be repaired and those people who might have breathed in any fibres should be told. If the incident happened only once then the risk to anyone's health is minimal. If such an incident happened only once then the risk to anyone's health is minimal. However if such a practice continued over a long time then regrettably then there is a potential risk to health. The risk is small but there is a risk. If a hole has been kicked in an asbestos insulating board wall then there is also a similar risk to health.

Even after a minor incident involving asbestos rumours abound and people can be anxious and concerned unnecessarily. Such an occasion warrants prompt and reasoned advice so that they can be given a true measure of the risk and their concerns can be dispelled. Secrecy following an asbestos incident is not acceptable, although it is common practice. The school authorities should always adopt a policy of openness by telling people the facts.

HSE Advice on Informing The existing advice applies to any incident and is not written specifically for schools, instead it provides vague and ambiguous advice. In 2004 the Schools Minister expressed his concerns and stated that it should be urgently updated. Regrettably despite the Minister's requirements the HSE have done nothing as they state, incorrectly, that the guidance is perfectly adequate and they have no intention of updating it. The guidance is still obtainable on the HSE web site under "OC265/48 Inadvertent Exposure to Asbestos."
http://www.hse.gov.uk/foi/internalops/fod/oc/200-299/265_48.pdf

Medical advice

Unless the incident is a minor one schools should consult a specialist doctor and he will be able to assess the extent of the risk and give advice. The Local Authority's Environmental Health Officer can be consulted also the HSE Employment Medical Advisory Service may be able to provide details of people in your area who can give help and advice.

The incident should be recorded in the Management Plan along with the names of those who were likely to have breathed in any fibres. They should be given prompt and reasoned advice giving a scale of the risk and advising them to contact their GP who should record the incident in the person's medical records.

Summary

Most schools have excellent systems for making sure that no one is exposed to asbestos. However a few are not as conscientious, and their lack of planning and implementing a workable asbestos management plan means that asbestos can be damaged and the dangerous fibres can be released. As parents, teachers and ancillary staff you have a vested interest in making sure that your school has a good asbestos management plan and that the school authorities take the necessary measures to ensure that it works. The guidance in this paper is not meant to be the "Complete Guide to Managing Asbestos" however if these measure are implemented then the school will have a workable plan. Look at your school's plan, ask questions and decide for yourselves whether the school are doing their best to assure your safety and that of your children.

Further Reading

If you want to know more then read the HSE publication "A Comprehensive Guide to Managing Asbestos In Premises." This is a well written book with some very good practical guidance, however when you are reading it, do bear in mind the reservations that have been raised in this paper over the present laws and guidance when applied to schools. This book can be bought from HSE Publications details of which are on the HSE web site.

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