

## UNDERSTANDING ASBESTOS

### **WHAT IS ASBESTOS?**

Asbestos is a generic term used to describe a variety of natural mineral fibers. From the early 1930s until the 1970s, manufacturers used asbestos to strengthen products and to provide heat insulation and fire resistance. Asbestos also resists corrosion and is a poor conductor of electricity. Because few products contained all of these properties, asbestos was widely used in the construction of homes, schools and other buildings.

### **HOW CAN I BE EXPOSED TO ASBESTOS?**

Most people are exposed to small amounts of asbestos in their daily lives. However, if materials containing asbestos are disturbed – for example sawed, scraped, or sanded into a powder – fibers are more likely to become airborne and inhaled into the lungs. Asbestos fibers are primarily a respiratory health hazard. Fibers that get into water or food also may be ingested, although they usually pass through the digestive system and do not cause a problem.

### **HOW CAN ASBESTOS AFFECT MY HEALTH?**

Studies of people who were exposed to asbestos for a long time in factories and shipyards show that breathing high levels of asbestos fibers can lead to an increased risk of lung cancer; mesothelioma, a rare but fatal form of cancer in the thin membrane lining of the chest and abdominal cavities; and asbestosis, a serious non-cancerous respiratory disease in which asbestos fibers aggravate and scar lung tissue. The risk of these health problems also increases for tobacco smokers.

### **WHERE CAN ASBESTOS BE FOUND?**

Until the 1970s, many types of building products and insulation materials used in homes contained asbestos, although most products made today do not. The only way to get a positive identification of asbestos is to analyze a sample using a special type of microscope.

If you discover asbestos in your home, it does not pose a serious problem as long as it remains in good condition. Usually, it is best to leave asbestos material alone. Over time, it may become damaged, either from being disturbed or from age, at which point it is more likely to become airborne and a health hazard.

Common products in your home that might contain asbestos include:

- **Insulation around steam pipes, furnaces and air ducts** – Asbestos fibers may be released when insulation is damaged or removed improperly.
- **Vinyl floor covering** – Vinyl tiles, the backing on vinyl sheet flooring and adhesives (mastic) used for installing floor covering may become a problem if sanded or scraped during removal.
- **Roof shingles and siding** – These products, if they contain asbestos, are not likely to release asbestos fibers unless sawed or drilled.
- **Soundproofing or decorative material** – If sprayed on walls and ceilings, material that is loose, crumbly or water-damaged may release fibers. So could material that is sanded, drilled or scraped.
- Other products that may contain asbestos:
  - ☑ Cement sheet, millboard;
  - ☑ Door gaskets in furnaces;
  - ☑ Patching and joint compounds;
  - ☑ Textured paints;
  - ☑ Artificial ashes and embers for gas fired fireplaces;
  - ☑ Fireproof gloves, stove-top pads, ironing board covers and hairdryers; and
  - ☑ Automobile brake pads and linings, clutch facings and gaskets.

### **HOW DOES PENNSYLVANIA REGULATE ASBESTOS?**

Because asbestos in certain forms can cause serious health problems, the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) regulates the removal, collection, transportation and disposal of asbestos materials. The DEP Bureau of Air Quality has adopted and enforces the federal asbestos regulations (40 CFR

Part 61 Subpart M). DEP does not regulate the removal of asbestos from private homes. However, under the Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry (PA DL&I) Asbestos Occupations Accreditation and Certification Act (Number 1990-194), friable asbestos material disturbed by someone other than the homeowner may be regulated. Contact the PA DL&I at (717) 772-3396 for more information. Contact your municipality to find out about local regulations.

Pennsylvania requires certifications for the following asbestos occupations: contractor, inspector, management planner, project designer, supervisor and worker. Call the State Department of Labor and Industry at (717) 772-3396 for more information about the Asbestos Occupations Accreditation and Certification Act of 1990 (Acts 194 and 161).

### **ASBESTOS IN SCHOOLS**

All nonprofit private and public school administrators, with children in grades one through 12, are required to inspect their buildings for asbestos, develop a plan for controlling the release of asbestos fibers and maintain asbestos that is in good condition. Questions should be directed to DEP at (717) 787-9257.

### **ENFORCEMENT/COMPLAINTS**

If you suspect improper asbestos removal or repair projects, contact your regional DEP office listed below.

### **ATTENTION ASBESTOS CONTRACTORS**

Asbestos contractors in Pennsylvania must abide by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Asbestos regulations in 40 CFR Part 61, Subpart M. Questions about these regulations may be referred to any DEP regional Air Quality program office listed below.

The Pennsylvania Asbestos Accreditation and Certification Act (Act 194 and Act 161) requires contractors to be certified and licensed by the Department of Labor and Industry to perform renovation projects involving asbestos. For more detailed information about these requirements, call (717) 772-3396.

**Additional regulations exist for demolition and renovation of any building with asbestos-containing material (ACM) in Philadelphia and Allegheny counties. In Philadelphia County, call (215) 685-7576. In Allegheny County, call (412) 578-8038. It is important to contact these offices if your project is located in either of these two counties.**

### **HOW CAN I GET MORE INFORMATION?**

1. Call the DEP Bureau of Air Quality central office in Harrisburg (717) 787-9257. On-line information about asbestos can be found at [www.depweb.state.pa.us](http://www.depweb.state.pa.us), keyword: Asbestos.
2. Call the Air Quality program at the DEP regional office nearest you:
  - Southeast (Norristown), (484) 250-5900
  - Southcentral (Harrisburg), (717) 705-4702
  - Northwest (Meadville), (814) 332-6940
  - Southwest (Pittsburgh), (412) 442-4174
  - Northeast (Wilkes-Barre), (570) 826-2511
  - Northcentral (Williamsport), (570) 327-3638
3. If you live in Allegheny County, call (412) 578-8319 for information and special regulations.
4. If you live in Philadelphia County, call (215) 685-7576 for information and special regulations.
5. Contact your municipality to find out if there are any local regulations.
6. The EPA Asbestos Ombudsman, (800) 368-5888, has an asbestos information package available to the public.
7. The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, (800) 638-2772, will send information about asbestos upon request.
8. The Pennsylvania Department of Labor and Industry, (717) 772-3396, has information about certification requirements for the asbestos disciplines.

The American Lung Association, the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission and EPA provided much of the information included in this fact sheet.

For more information, visit [www.depweb.state.pa.us](http://www.depweb.state.pa.us), keyword: Asbestos.