

HOME BUILDING SURVEY – ASBESTOS CEMENT PRODUCTS – GENERAL ADVICE

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Asbestos

Asbestos is a naturally occurring substance, so some asbestos fibres are liberated into the atmosphere. Everybody is exposed to some asbestos fibres whether working under an asbestos cement roof, playing in the local park or sailing across the ocean. At very low natural levels, they do not cause a danger but they become dangerous when the level of free fibres is increased by the inappropriate use by man. The Asbestos Prohibition Amendment Regulations 1999 No. 2373/99 imposed a total ban from November 24th 1999 on the selling and fixing of asbestos containing products. This ban extends to selling and fixing second-hand asbestos cement products. It does not affect the sale of property that contains any asbestos cement products. It does not mean that asbestos containing materials should be removed just because they contain asbestos; this would be counterproductive. Important information includes: – In 1999 the Health and Safety Executive guidance Working with Asbestos – HSG 189/2 + The approved Code of Practice Work with Materials Containing Asbestos Control of Asbestos Regulations 2006/L143 + A comprehensive guide to Managing Asbestos in Premises HSG227. The handling of low density insulation boards and spray coatings containing asbestos is a skilled job that must be carried out by a contractor licensed by the HSE and is not covered by this guidance note.

Asbestos cement

Asbestos cement is a cement based product where about 10% asbestos fibres are added to reinforce the cement. It was often used for corrugated sheets, slates, moulded fittings, soffit boards and undercloak, water systems, rainwater gutters, downpipes, pressure pipes, underground drainage, sewer pipes, sills, copings, chalk boards, fascias, infill panels etc. It is sometimes difficult to tell the difference between an asbestos cement product and a low density insulation board. Where the product has been used as roofing or cladding product, open to the weather, you can be reasonably confident that the product is asbestos cement. Manufacture of all low density products was stopped in the late 1970s and since they were not weather resistant, if they had been fixed outside, they would have broken down long before now. If the product is moulded it will be asbestos cement as low density products were not moulded except as half round shape for pipe lagging.

When cementitious products like asbestos cement were manufactured, they had a cement ridge surface. The asbestos fibres are encapsulated within this. Thus occupants of buildings with asbestos cement sheet or manmade slate roofs are unlikely to be at any greater risk than people outside in the fresh air. The small quantities of fibres released during natural weathering are unlikely to be dangerous but significant and possibly dangerous amounts of fibre can be released if the products are subject to abrasive cleaning or working. Thus, roofing operatives are more at risk from fibre exposure than any residents that building owners keep a note of asbestos containing products in the building and advise any contractors of their position so that they can take the necessary precautions.

General guidance on the working with asbestos cement products

The precautions required when working with an asbestos cement produce are relatively easy but must be followed or there is the risk of creating dangerous quantities of fibres. If the precautions listed below are followed it is unlikely that the control level or action level will be breached. There is not a requirement to use a 'licensed contractor' but the contractor should be competent.

- Carry out a risk assessment and write a method statement to ensure that the risk is reduced to the minimum possible and certainly that any fibre release is below the ten minute limit and control limit and set out in the Control of Asbestos Regulations 2006. Information on the ten minute level and control limit can be found in the 'Approved Code of Practice The Management of Asbestos in Non Domestic Premises L127 ISBN 07176/6209'
- Ensure the operatives know that they are working on asbestos containing products and that they are adequately trained.
- Segregate the working areas with warning signs. The operatives should wear a disposable mask that is CE marked to EN149 with FFP3 particulate filters and disposable overalls which should be disposed of at the end of the shift as asbestos waste.
- When working at heights follow the advice in HSG33 Health and Safety in Roof Work (1998). Old asbestos cement sheets are very fragile.
- Keep the material wet when working on it.
- Avoid using power tools and breaking asbestos containing products but carefully remove or crop cut fixings so that the product can be removed in one piece. Carefully carry to the ground and either double wrap in polythene or place in a covered skip.
- Where it is necessary to cut or trim asbestos cement sheets, ensure the material is wet and if possible scribe and break. If this is not possible, use hand tools preferably in the open air.
- Keep the site clean and tidy at all times and clean up after work by dampening down any dust and carefully placing in a polythene bag for disposal as asbestos waste.

Where an asbestos cement roof or cladding is being repaired, it is lawful to re-use the existing asbestos cement sheets as long as the correct working practices are used to keep asbestos exposure of the operatives to the minimum possible. We recommend that whenever an asbestos cement product is removed it be replaced with a non-asbestos alternative. Where an asbestos cement corrugated roof has come to the end of its economic life, rather than replacing it, it may be safer and most cost effective leave the sheets in place and over-roof with a non-asbestos roofing sheet adding insulation as required.

Cleaning asbestos cement roofs

This should only be carried out if it cannot be avoided, moss and lichens although some may think them unsightly, are not normally detrimental. Asbestos cement is very fragile and so the recommendations in HSG33 Health and Safety in Roof Work (1998) should be followed. Do not clean by dry scraping or by pressure washing as both can produce dangerous quantities of free asbestos fibres. Remote cleaning is a technique involving skilled operatives using units with enclosed rotary cleaning heads and high pressure water jets which filter the run-off and dispose of the filter waste as asbestos waste. Cleaning with surface biocides is where this material is applied with low pressure sprays or as washes. The roof is then left for the moss and lichen to die where it can be gently brushed off the roof with soft brushes. It is important that the roof is kept wet during the brushing and the waste is carefully placed in plastic bins and disposed of as asbestos waste.

Waste disposal

Asbestos waste is any waste which contains more than 0.1% of asbestos. It is subject to the Waste Management Controls set out in the Hazardous Waste Regulations 2005 and the Agricultural Waste Regulations. In most cases, if more than 200 kilograms of asbestos containing waste (500 kilograms for agricultural asbestos waste) is removed from the site, then the site has to be registered as a hazardous waste producer with the Environment Agency. The waste must be consigned as soon as possible by a licensed haulier to a dump licensed to take asbestos. Your Local Authority should have a list of licensed hauliers and waste dumps in your area. 04/10/2016