

General Information about Asbestos

1. What is asbestos?

Asbestos is a general term given to a group of naturally occurring mineral silicates that are made up of long thin fibres. These fibrous minerals were used in a wide range of products in construction and industry, because of their unique properties which include heat resistance, chemical resistance, and heat and electrical insulation.

2. Why do UofT buildings have asbestos?

Asbestos is not unique to University of Toronto buildings. Asbestos is found in many buildings built after World War II in Canada and internationally. This includes hospitals, schools, government buildings, banks, commercial properties and residential homes.

Due to its unique physical and chemical properties, asbestos was added to a wide variety of products to strengthen them, to provide heat or electrical insulation, to offer fire or chemical resistance, and/or to absorb sound. Many building materials manufactured during the peak years of use (WWII to the 1980s) such as sprayed fire-proofing, thermal insulation, ceiling tiles, floor tiles, electrical insulation and roofing materials contain asbestos.

3. I heard asbestos is naturally in the air. Is this true?

Asbestos is a geological mineral and fibres are naturally occurring. As a result, it is present in ambient outdoor air. This, combined with the widespread use of asbestos in products such as automotive brake linings, means that we are all exposed to very small amounts of asbestos in our daily lives. Asbestos fibres can also be found in drinking water.

4. What is friable asbestos material?

“friable material” means material that,

- (a) when dry, can be crumbled, pulverized or powdered by hand pressure, or
- (b) is crumbled, pulverized or powdered;

5. I work in a building that contains asbestos. Should I be concerned?

Extensive studies have been conducted in buildings containing asbestos have not shown an elevated risk to occupants simply working in a building with asbestos.

6. I heard that sometimes family members can get asbestos-related illnesses. Should I be worried for my family if I work in a building with asbestos?

Studies have shown that family members of asbestos workers (e.g. construction, trades, shipyards) may be at risk of contracting illnesses but not those simply occupying a building that contains asbestos.

7. Is exposure to 1 (one) fibre sufficient to cause asbestos-related illnesses?

Available scientific literature has consistently shown that asbestos-related disease are caused by high levels of asbestos over an extended period of time and that they primarily affect workers in certain industries such as construction, trades, shipyards, factories and asbestos mining. Also, asbestos is naturally in the air. So on a daily basis, all people are being exposed to small amounts of asbestos.

8. What should I do if I encounter broken or damaged building materials in my work area is damaged?

Do not disturb the material. Leave the area. Call 416-978-3000 during regular business hours and Campus Police at 416-978-2222 during non-business hours.

If you believe you have been exposed to asbestos dust or debris, please report it immediately to your supervisor. Your supervisor will complete an online incident report form and submit it to the Office of Environmental Health and Safety (EHS) for follow up. Students should report to their academic supervisor who can complete the online incident report on their behalf. EHS can also be contacted at 416-978-4467.

Online incident report forms are available here: <https://ehs.utoronto.ca/report-an-incident/>

9. I work in a building with sprayed asbestos fire-proofing. What should I do if a ceiling tile falls down?

Do not disturb the material. Leave the area. Call 416-978-3000 during regular business hours and Campus Police at 416-978-2222 during non-business hours.

10. What if I need to make changes to my workspace, such as installing new furniture, shelving, alarms, etc.? How can this be done safely if asbestos is in so many building materials?

Any work that causes disturbance (e.g. drilling, screwing in, cutting, grinding, scraping, demolition) of the building fabric (e.g. walls, ceilings, flooring) should be vetted through a UofT facilities and/or property management contact to ensure that Designated Substances such as asbestos are identified ahead of time. This ensures appropriate work procedures are used if asbestos, or other Designated Substances, are present. Occupants should not perform repairs, maintenance or new installations on their own.

11. How is asbestos exposure determined?

Asbestos is a respiratory hazard. Air sampling is the most relevant and recognized way to assess exposure to asbestos.

12. What is the role of the Joint Health and Safety Committee (JHSC) when an asbestos incident has occurred?

The JHSC plays an important role in the internal responsibility system as set out by the Ontario Occupational Health and Safety Act. Employees may contact the JHSC with queries which they can help facilitate by conveying questions and concerns to the relevant UofT party/unit. The JHSC is also notified of any air sampling that may take place to evaluate asbestos exposure and a copy of the air sampling results are provided to the JHSC.