

Asbestos in schools: how big an issue is it?

*Many schools built between the 1950s and 1980s may contain asbestos, so how can they ensure people aren't exposed to it? **Fiona Riley**, Chair of the Institution of Occupational Safety and Health (IOSH) Education Group, explores the issue*

If you go back a few decades, asbestos was seen as the wonder material. Its versatility, strength and heat and chemical resistance meant it was widely used in new buildings.

How times have changed. We now know that asbestos is a killer – one which is responsible for 5,000 deaths a year in Britain – which is why its use has been banned here since 1999.

While this means buildings constructed since then don't contain it, it doesn't mean it has been removed from those built before. In fact, it is estimated that at least 500,000 buildings in Britain still contain it, many of them schools. It can be found in many products including roofing, spray coatings, lagging, insulating boards, ropes, yarns and cloth.

Asbestos fibres are invisible to the naked eye. When breathed in, they can stick into the lining of the lungs, causing serious illnesses over time, including fatal cancers like mesothelioma.

How big a concern is asbestos?

Since 2001, more than 200 teachers have died across the country from mesothelioma, according to the National Education Union (formerly the National Union of Teachers).

Mesothelioma typically develops over 20 or more years following exposure to asbestos. So, someone who dies this year is likely to have been exposed at some point in the 1990s or before.

However, the fact that so many buildings still contain it gives cause for concern that people are still being exposed today and may be suffering the life-limiting effects by 2040 or beyond. In an era when we know all about the risks and how they can be managed, this is simply unacceptable.

And it isn't just teachers who could be exposed, of course; children are at risk if they come into contact with asbestos. In fact, Government research has found that children who are exposed to asbestos are five times more likely to contract the disease than adults aged 30.

There have been many estimates about how many school buildings contain asbestos. The UK Health and Safety Executive (HSE) suggested in 2012 that 37% of buildings are likely to contain it, which equates to 11,000 schools. However, other estimates have suggested the figures may be as high as 75% or even 83%.

What is for certain is that many, many schools contain this killer material.

Research by the BBC has found that just over half of schools in the North West are known to contain asbestos, but local authorities do not know if 44% of schools have the material or not. This is because many schools (61%) are outside local education authority control, including academies and free schools, and are not obliged to report to them.

The UK Health and Safety Executive, which requires all employers to notify them if asbestos is released into the air "sufficient to cause potential damage to the health of any person", that it has received an average 40 reports from schools per year for the past five years.

There have been a number of prosecutions for asbestos management failures. A recent example was the £200,000 fine for Kent County Council, in September 2018, for failing to manage asbestos in a school under its control.

As a sign of how seriously the Department for Education is taking the matter, it has launched its Asbestos Management Assurance Process, a scheme where schools have to **provide written assurance** that their buildings are compliant with legislation on the management of asbestos.

Is your school at risk and what you should do?

There have been calls in recent years for the complete removal of asbestos from all buildings.

A report by the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Occupational Safety and Health issued a report which called for all pre-2000 buildings to have a full asbestos survey by 2022. It went on to call for the removal of all asbestos from schools by 2028.

This report, and questions over the likelihood of such a target being met, were highlighted by Charles Pickles, of asbestos management experts Lucion Services, in a document he produced called *Asbestos in Schools: the case for reassurance air monitoring with Scanning Electron Microscopy*.

The fact remains, however, that asbestos is present in huge numbers – likely thousands – of schools so it is crucial, therefore, that they manage it properly. Quite simply, if asbestos isn't disturbed it doesn't present a risk. But if your school is undergoing a refurbishment, for example, you must consider whether there is a risk of disturbing asbestos.

So, what can schools do to manage it properly?

Most teachers, other school staff and students aren't directly involved in the management of buildings or in any maintenance and repair work. However, in the case of employees, they should be informed of the location of any asbestos-containing materials (ACMs).

For the past year or so, IOSH's No Time to Lose campaign has focused on asbestos and how organisations should manage it. For the campaign, IOSH has produced free resources to help businesses.

All schools should be aware of whether there is any asbestos in their premises. If it was built before 2000 then there is a chance it will contain it.

Those that do contain it should have an asbestos management plan, which includes details such as where it is, who is responsible for managing it, and a schedule for monitoring the condition of ACMs.

Employees – and of course students or any contractors – must not be asked to do any work which could disturb asbestos and must know exactly where it is located. Training should also be provided on how to work safely around ACMs.

If anyone believes they may have disturbed, or may be about to disturb, ACMs, they should take the following steps:

- Stop work immediately
- Move everyone away and ensure no one enters the area
- Do not remove equipment or materials

- Close, seal or lock off the area
- Put up warning signs
- Report it to your employer

No one should have their life cut short by work activities. As with fatalities from workplace accidents, deaths from exposure to asbestos are avoidable.

Organisations can all play their part in ensuring workers do not have a death sentence like mesothelioma hanging over them.

More details can be found at www.notimetolose.org.uk

The IOSH Education Group will be holding a networking event 'Embracing risk in education' in 10th October 2019 at Leicester Racecourse, which will look at legal responsibilities including asbestos in educational premises. This event will be relevant for personnel with health and safety responsibilities within the education sector.