

Management of asbestos at UNSW

The University receives a number of queries regarding the maintenance and removal of asbestos on campus. This fact sheet is intended to address some of the more common queries that arise from staff and students.

What is asbestos and why is it found in certain buildings and infrastructure?

Asbestos is a naturally occurring substance that has been mined and processed for thousands of years. The term asbestos refers to six known types of naturally occurring mineral fibres which can be broken down in the following two main groups:

- Serpentine Group – comprised of only chrysotile (white asbestos)
- Amphibole Group – comprised of anthophyllite, amosite (brown asbestos or grey asbestos), crocidolite (blue asbestos), tremolite, and actinolite.

Australia was one of the highest per capita users of asbestos in the world in the 20th century. Asbestos was extensively used in the building and construction, shipping and manufacturing industries in many and varied products due to its fire resistant and insulation properties.

An estimated one third of homes built between 1945 and the late 1980s may contain asbestos in areas such as ceilings, internal walls, roofs, eaves, external cladding, wet areas and vinyl floor tiles. Asbestos was also included in products such as brake pads, gaskets and seals, pipes and pipe lagging.



Figure 1: examples of where Asbestos may be found

The manufacture, importation and installation of products containing crocidolite and amosite was banned from 1985. By the late 1980s, the use of asbestos in building products was banned and in December 2003, a national ban on all uses of chrysotile asbestos came into effect.

How is asbestos classified?

Asbestos is categorised as either friable or non-friable.

- **Friable asbestos:** refers to material that is in a powder form or that can be crumbled, pulverised or reduced to a powder by hand pressure
- **Non-friable asbestos:** refers to material that is not friable asbestos, including material containing asbestos fibres reinforced with a bonding compound.

Both friable and non-friable asbestos pose a significant health risk to all workers and others if the materials are not properly maintained or removed with appropriate controls.

What hazards does asbestos present?

Disturbing asbestos may cause fine asbestos fibres to become airborne, which can then be breathed in (through the nose or mouth) and penetrate the deepest part of the lungs causing lung cancer, mesothelioma and asbestosis. On average, there is a 30-40 year latency period between exposure to asbestos fibres and the onset of disease.

Why is asbestos found at UNSW?

As the UNSW campus has evolved and developed over the years, many buildings were built or modified during the time when asbestos was widely used in the construction industry. For this reason, asbestos is still found on campus. Examples include certain types of vinyl floor tiles, window frames and walls.

How does UNSW manage asbestos on site?

UNSW manages and controls asbestos in accordance with Work, Health and Safety legislative requirements (*Work Health and Safety Act, 2011 and Work Health and Safety Regulation (NSW) 2017*), including in the following ways:

- UNSW engages expert consultants to identify asbestos on the campus
- UNSW has an asbestos register for all of its sites which is regularly reviewed in accordance with WHS legislative requirements or when risk management requires it
- UNSW has used the risk management process to assess known high risk materials and remove them where practical
- Bonded asbestos materials which are still in place on campus have been assessed by expert consultants and are labelled, maintained and continuously monitored for damage or wear
- UNSW has an asbestos management plan
- Prior to any renovations/redevelopments the area is assessed for asbestos in advance
- Where practical, bonded asbestos is removed during renovations or redevelopments

What about asbestos removal at UNSW?

Whenever a construction or refurbishment project occurs at UNSW, a detailed assessment is always undertaken to assess hazardous materials which may need to be controlled during the project. This includes asbestos and the necessary strategies to protect our staff, students and wider community in its removal.

If workers require personal protective clothing and equipment to remove asbestos, do I need special protection too if I'm in the vicinity?

By law, persons removing asbestos are required to wear personal protective clothing and equipment (PPCE) for their own protection due to the higher risk of exposure. With regard to protection for the public, the types of control measures which are put in place include the following:

- Exclusion zones enforced by barricades that prevent non-essential persons from accessing the area
- Area supervisors in place
- Where required, wet processes or use of methods which do not generate dust/airborne fibres
- Warning signs
- Air monitoring
- Use of licensed specialist asbestos removalists

How would I know if a refurbishment project in my area is removing asbestos?

Your local area project liaison officer or faculty Building Facilities Manager (BFM) will be able to provide further information for smaller/renovation projects. For large redevelopment projects, the EM project manager can be contacted.

How do I know if asbestos is present in my local work area?

There are a few ways in which you can find out or determine about whether asbestos is in your local work area:

- Talk to your WHS level 3 committee representative. They can consult the relevant BFM or EM project manager who can provide the necessary information
- Stickers have been placed on or near all known asbestos on campus (*refer to figure 2*).



Figure 2: asbestos warning labels used at UNSW

What should I do if I notice damaged asbestos in my area?

Asbestos that is in good condition and unlikely to be damaged or disturbed is not a significant risk to health as long as it is managed in accordance with prescribed requirements. However, if you do notice damaged material near a sticker outlined in the above point, it is best to contact [EM Assist \(x51111\)](#) who will be able to arrange the necessary personnel to take action. Your local Health and Safety representative or local floor or building warden can also be contacted to assist in isolating the area and ensuring the material is not touched or disturbed.

Where can I go for more information?

For further general information on asbestos, please refer to the reference section below. For issues specific to UNSW, please contact your BFM.

Estate Management

Phone

+61 (2) 9385 5111 or x55111

Address

Mathews Building F23, Level 2 (Pavilions Level)

Botany Street, Gate 11

Kensington 2033

Email

estate@unsw.edu.au

References:

- (1) *Australian Government : Asbestos Fact Sheet*
- (2) [*Australian Government: Asbestos Information*](#)
- (3) [*Code of Practice: How to manage and control asbestos in the workplace*](#)
- (4) [*Code of Practice: How to safely remove asbestos*](#)