

Spot The Safety Violation: Take 4 Steps to Protect Workers from Asbestos



What would you say if we told you the debris this young volunteer is cleaning up likely contains asbestos'



Asbestos is a mineral fibre that used to be used in insulation and fireproofing, and added to materials such as cement or plaster to increase structural strength. But inhalation of asbestos fibres poses serious health risks to workers' and long-term exposure can result in mesothelioma, an aggressive cancer linked to asbestos.

[This picture](#) shows one of a group of teenage volunteers who agreed to help clean up Detroit's [Michigan Central Depot](#). Unbeknownst to them, the debris they were removing probably contained friable asbestos. As you can see, the work generated a considerable amount of dust. But in some cases, the young workers weren't wearing any PPE. And when they were, such as the worker in this picture, the PPE may not have been appropriate for the hazards involved.

Even seemingly simple tasks could potentially expose workers to this hazardous substance' and result in fines.

Example: In separate incidents, maintenance workers for an Ontario hospital drilled holes into a wall and ceiling that

contained asbestos. But the drill wasn't equipped with a HEPA filter. Although the workers were wearing masks, they didn't take any other precautions to protect themselves or co-workers in the area. And the hospital didn't tell the workers they were working in an area containing asbestos or train them on working around it. The hospital pleaded guilty to four OHS violations and was fined \$60,000 [*Pembroke Regional Hospital Inc.*, Govt. News Release, Feb. 27, 2013].

Because of the serious health hazards that exposure to asbestos poses, the OHS regulations across Canada impose asbestos-related requirements on employers. In fact, Saskatchewan recently updated its asbestos requirements as of June 1, 2014 and now require employers, contractors and owners to:

- Identify and label asbestos containing materials (ACM) that can release asbestos fibres
- Regularly check and maintain ACM to prevent any fibre release
- Develop written control plans to prevent the release of asbestos fibre into occupied areas when maintenance, repairs, renovations or other work may disturb ACM.

Take 4 Steps to Protect Workers from Exposure to Asbestos

Naturally, you should comply with the asbestos-related requirements in your jurisdictions OHS laws. But in general, employers should take the following steps to protect workers' and volunteers' from exposure to this very hazardous substance:

Step #1: Implement an asbestos control plan. If asbestos is a hazard in your workplace or operations, develop and implement an asbestos control plan that spells out how you'll prevent asbestos and asbestos-containing material from becoming airborne and protect workers from asbestos if it does become airborne. Such a plan should cover:

- Engineering controls, work practices and hygiene practices and facilities to control workers' exposure to asbestos;
- Methods and procedures to monitor the concentrations of airborne asbestos in the workplace;
- Personnel records of workers' exposure to asbestos; and
- Medical monitoring of workers.

Step #2: Minimize the release of asbestos. Because asbestos is only a health hazard when it's airborne, most OHS regulations require employers to take steps to minimize the amount of asbestos released into the air.

Step #3: Use safety measures to protect workers from airborne asbestos. Implement safety measures to protect workers from exposure to any asbestos that does become airborne. Such measures should likely include:

- Proper ventilation systems;
- Monitoring of asbestos levels to ensure that they don't exceed designated levels;
- PPE, most notably [respirators](#) but also proper protective clothing and gloves;
- Sealed containers labelled as containing asbestos for the disposal of materials, clothing, etc. contaminated with asbestos; and
- Procedures and facilities in place to decontaminate workers and their clothing, PPE and equipment that has become contaminated with asbestos.

Step #4: Monitor the health of workers exposed to asbestos. Workers exposed to asbestos may not become sick immediately. In fact, the impact of such exposure on their health may take years to become apparent and by then it may be too late. So it's critical that you have a program in place for monitoring the health of workers who are or may have been exposed to asbestos. (Learn more about the [requirements for medical monitoring](#) of workers exposed to asbestos and other hazardous

substances.)