How to Manage and Control Asbestos in the Workplace

Code of Practice Fact Sheet

The Code of Practice – How to Manage and Control Asbestos in the Workplace is available on the SafeWork SA website at safework.sa.gov.au. This fact sheet provides a summary of that Code, and is primarily for small businesses that may need to know how to deal with asbestos in their workplace. Licenced asbestos removalists should refer to the Code.

Asbestos in the workplace

Despite being banned from use in South Australia for many years, asbestos remains an ongoing threat to public health.

Asbestos fibres were widely used in the past because of their unique chemical and physical properties. They could protect against fire, corrosion, cold, acids, alkalis, electricity, noise, energy loss, vibration, salt water, frost, dust and even vermin. Asbestos also had excellent friction and wear resistance, and so was used extensively in brake linings and clutch facings.

Refer to page 9 of the Code for key terms associated with the management of asbestos.

Managing risks

Managing the risks associated with exposure to asbestos and asbestos-containing material (ACM) involves the following simple risk management approach:

1. Identify asbestos at the workplace, label it and record it in an asbestos register.
2. Assess the risk of exposure to airborne asbestos.
3. Eliminate or minimise the risks by implementing control measures.
4. Review control measures to ensure they are effective.

Refer to pages 11–16 of the Code for more information.

1. Identifying asbestos at a workplace

The identification of asbestos in the workplace by a competent person is the first step in managing the risk of exposure to asbestos.

If the person with management or control of the workplace assumes that asbestos or ACM is present, or if they have reasonable grounds to believe that asbestos is not present, a competent person does not need to be engaged to make that decision.

If you’re unsure whether asbestos is present in any part of a structure or plant it is always best to assume it is present and treat it with appropriate caution.

Refer to pages 12–14 and page 45 of the Code for more information, including a procedure a competent person can follow when undertaking sampling.

Asbestos registers

Where asbestos has been identified or is likely to be identified (or where the building was constructed prior to 31 December 2003), an asbestos register must be prepared and kept at the workplace. The asbestos register must be maintained to ensure the information in the register is up-to-date.

Refer to pages 20–22 of the Code for specific requirements, including exceptions, and pages 47–48 of the Code for a template and example of an asbestos register.

2. Assessing the risk of exposure

If asbestos is in good condition and left undisturbed, it is unlikely that airborne asbestos fibres will be released into the air and the risk to health is low. Therefore, it is usually safer to leave it labelled and undisturbed, and review its condition over time.

However, if the asbestos has deteriorated, has been disturbed, or if asbestos-contaminated dust is present, the likelihood that exposure may occur is increased.

Refer to pages 18–19 of the Code for more information, including a list which ranks different types of asbestos according to the likelihood that airborne asbestos can be released into the air if it has deteriorated or been disturbed.

A visual inspection of the material, its location and an understanding of the work practices at the workplace will assist this decision.

Asbestos-related work activities also need to be considered.

Asbestos-related work

Asbestos-related work activities are a type of work with asbestos which is permitted to occur in certain circumstances. It can include maintenance, plus unusual and infrequent activities (such as emergency activities).
Refer to page 49 of the Code for examples of asbestos-related work. Refer to page 29 of the Code for more information on the requirements for asbestos-related work, including consultation and training, access to asbestos work areas, the use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), replacing and disposing of asbestos, and other control measures for asbestos-related work.

Asbestos management plans
A written asbestos management plan sets out how asbestos or ACM identified at the workplace will be managed. It must be prepared for the workplace if asbestos has been identified or assumed present, or is likely to be present from time to time at the workplace.

The plan must be maintained to ensure the information is up-to-date (at least every five years), and must be kept at the workplace to ensure it’s accessible.

Refer to page 23 of the Code for more information on asbestos management plans, including maintenance of and access to the plan.

3. Control measures
When choosing the most appropriate control measure, the following hierarchy of controls must be considered:
• eliminate the risk e.g. remove the asbestos
• substitute the risk, isolate the risk or apply engineering controls e.g. enclose, encapsulate, seal
• use administrative controls e.g. safe work practices, labelling
• use PPE.

A combination of these controls may be required in order to adequately manage and control asbestos.

Refer to pages 38–44 of the Code for more information.

The Code of Practice – How to Safety Remove Asbestos provides more detailed information on the safe removal and disposal of asbestos and decontamination procedures, including when you need to use a licensed removalist.

Indicating the presence of asbestos in the workplace
All identified or assumed asbestos, including where the asbestos is inaccessible, must be clearly indicated e.g. using labels or, where appropriate, warning signs.

Refer to pages 45–46 of the Code for templates and examples of the sampling process, warning signs and labels.

Safe work practices
Safe work practices demonstrate how control measures have been implemented to eliminate or minimise exposure to airborne asbestos.

Refer to Appendix F of the Code on pages 52–65 for examples of some recommended safe work practices for service and maintenance tasks that are likely to disturb asbestos.

Demolition and refurbishment work
There are specific requirements for the management and control of asbestos when carrying out the demolition or refurbishment of a structure or plant constructed or installed before 31 December 2003. This work does not include minor routine maintenance work e.g. the removal of an asbestos-containing vinyl tile to install a plumbing fixture.

Refer to pages 26–27 of the Code for more information.

4. Reviewing control measures
Control measures that have been implemented must be reviewed and, if necessary, revised to make sure they work as planned and to maintain, so far as is reasonably practicable, a work environment that is without risks to health and safety.

If an asbestos register or asbestos management plan has been created for your workplace, they must be reviewed if circumstances change or are likely to change.

Refer to page 24 of the Code for more information.

Other
Asbestos friction materials
The removal and repair of brakes, clutches and high-temperature gaskets on motor vehicles presents a risk of exposure to dust that contains asbestos fibres.

Refer to page 49 of the Code for more information.