



Managing asbestos in schools - Frequently asked questions

What is asbestos?

Asbestos was a building material used extensively in the UK including the 1950s through to the 1990s. It was finally banned in 2000.

Why is asbestos dangerous?

Serious, often fatal diseases can be caused when asbestos fibres are released from materials, becoming airborne and inhaled. On average, there is a 30–40 year latency period between exposure to asbestos fibres and the onset of disease.

Where is asbestos found in schools?

Many schools, built before 2000, will contain some form of asbestos. Asbestos-containing materials (ACMs) include:

- » asbestos lagging used as thermal insulation on pipes and boilers
- » sprayed asbestos used for thermal insulation, fire protection, partitioning and ducts
- » asbestos-insulating board (AIB) used for fire protection, thermal insulation, partitioning and ducts
- » some ceiling tiles
- » floor tiles
- » cement roofing and guttering
- » textured coatings

Who's at risk from asbestos in schools?

The most likely way ACMs will create a risk in schools is when they are disturbed or damaged through maintenance, repair or construction activities. School caretakers are a particular group at risk due to the nature of their work, eg drilling and fixing, and other contractors may be at risk while undertaking maintenance or installation work. If asbestos is disturbed during such work, there is a risk that fibres will be released and create risk to others in the school.

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 properly managed. This means that teachers and pupils are unlikely to be at risk in the course of their normal activities. However, they should not undertake activities that damage ACMs, such as pinning or tacking work to insulation board or ceiling tiles.

Who is responsible for the management of asbestos in Northern Ireland schools?

Anyone who has responsibility for the maintenance and/or repair of non-domestic premises, including schools, is a 'dutyholder' as defined in Regulation 4 of the Control of Asbestos Regulations (NI) 2012. For the majority of schools, the dutyholder will be the employer which for the majority of schools this will be the Education and Library Boards or Council for Catholic Maintained Schools (CCMS).



What is the 'duty to manage' asbestos?

Dutyholders should know whether their premises contain asbestos, where it is and what condition it is in. Then they should ensure that they manage it properly.

They must assess and manage the risks from asbestos to employees and others. They must also ensure that anyone who is likely to work on, or disturb, asbestos is provided with information about its location and condition.

What does the dutyholder have to do in practice in a school?

The dutyholder's responsibilities include:

- » keeping an up-to-date record of the location and condition of ACMs in the school
- » assessing the risks from any ACMs in the school
- » making plans to manage the risks from ACMs in the school
- » putting those plans into action

Those most at risk of disturbing ACMs are tradespeople, caretakers, etc. The school's plan needs to contain provisions to ensure that information about the location and condition of ACMs is given to anyone who might disturb these materials. The dutyholder should also ensure that staff likely to disturb asbestos are suitably trained.

What is the role of school staff?

Most staff are not directly involved in managing the buildings or in carrying out repair or maintenance work. However, staff still need to be made aware of the potential hazards. All staff should be instructed not to disturb or damage ACMs, for example by pinning work to walls. They should also report damage to school fixtures or fittings that could lead to the release of asbestos fibres, eg damage to ceiling or floor tiles, or to column seals in system-built schools.

What do dutyholders need to know about using contractors?

Dutyholders need to check that any contractors likely to disturb asbestos are trained and competent for that work. Licensed contractors must be used for most work with asbestos insulation, AIB and asbestos coatings.

Those responsible for managing asbestos on the school premises have a key role in briefing contractors, whether procured through the local authority, or directly procured by the school. They should ensure that contractors are provided with all recorded information on the location and condition of ACMs.