

Asbestos Awareness:

Disturb It and It Kills

Where asbestos is found, the duty to manage it, what to do if you disturb it accidentally, and who can legally carry out removal.



Last reviewed: August 2026



HSE · CAW Regs 2012



England, Scotland and Wales

ukworkrights.co.uk

In Northern Ireland, similar duties come from Northern Ireland's own health and safety law. Contact HSENI (Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland), not the HSE.

Why asbestos is the UK's biggest killer

- Asbestos kills around **5,000 people per year** in the UK — more than any other occupational cause of death (HSE)
- Deaths are from **mesothelioma, lung cancer and asbestosis** — all caused by inhaling asbestos fibres
- The effects are **latent** — **symptoms appear 20–60 years** after exposure
- Asbestos was used extensively in UK buildings constructed or refurbished **before 2000**
- It is still present in **millions of non-domestic buildings** — schools, hospitals, offices, warehouses
- Asbestos is **safe if left undisturbed** — the risk comes from releasing fibres into the air
- You **cannot see or smell asbestos fibres** — standard dust masks offer no protection

▲ NEVER DISTURB SUSPECTED ASBESTOS

Stop work immediately. Move away from the area. Tell your supervisor. Do not sweep up or clean the area yourself.

Where asbestos may be present

- **Ceiling tiles and floor tiles** — particularly textured tiles
- **Textured coatings** — Artex on ceilings and walls
- **Pipe lagging** — insulation on boilers, pipes, ducts
- **Insulating board** — around windows, doors, in partition walls
- **Sprayed coatings** — on structural beams and columns
- **Roofing sheets** — corrugated asbestos cement
- **Gaskets and seals** — in older plant and machinery

THE DUTY TO MANAGE

Employers and building owners have a legal duty to manage asbestos in non-domestic premises. There must be an asbestos register and management plan. You have the right to see the register for your workplace.

ASK BEFORE YOU DRILL

Before any maintenance, renovation or drilling in a pre-2000 building — check the asbestos register. If in doubt, stop and check with your supervisor.

What to do if you accidentally disturb asbestos

1

Stop work immediately

Do not continue. The risk increases with every moment of further disturbance.

2

Move away and prevent others entering

Seal off the area if possible. Do not let anyone into the area without proper RPE.

3

Do not eat, drink or smoke

Wash hands and face with water. Remove outer clothing carefully to avoid further fibre release.

4

Report to your supervisor immediately

The site may need to be decontaminated. HSE may need to be notified. An asbestos analyst may be required to test air quality.

5

Seek medical advice

Tell your GP what happened and when. This creates a medical record — important for any future health issue.

Frequently asked questions

Q Who can remove asbestos?

Only licensed asbestos removal contractors (licensed by HSE) can remove most types of asbestos — particularly asbestos insulation board, lagging and sprayed coatings. Some lower-risk work (e.g. limited work with asbestos cement) may be done by unlicensed but trained contractors. Never attempt to remove asbestos yourself.

Q Is Artex on my ceiling dangerous?

Artex applied before 1985 commonly contains asbestos. If undisturbed and in good condition, it poses little risk. If you are planning to sand, scrape or drill through it, treat it as if it contains asbestos — get it tested first. DIY sampling kits are available, or use an accredited analyst.

Q What is an asbestos register?

A record of the location, type, condition and risk rating of asbestos-containing materials in a premises. Non-domestic premises built before 2000 must have one. Workers and contractors must be given access to it before starting work.

Q Can I claim if I develop an asbestos-related disease?

Yes — asbestos disease claims (mesothelioma, lung cancer, asbestosis) can be brought against former employers or their insurers. The Mesothelioma UK helpline (0800 169 2409) provides specialist support and can help trace former employers' insurers.

Delivery notes & attendance record

Before you start

Ask first whether anyone has worked on a pre-2000 building this week. Asbestos kills more UK workers than any other single work cause, and the people at highest risk are tradespeople who never think of themselves as asbestos workers.

Questions to ask the team

1. Which buildings on our current jobs were built before 2000?
2. Who here has actually seen the asbestos register for this site, and where is it kept?
3. What would you do in the first five minutes if you drilled into something and suspected asbestos?
4. Do you know who to report to, and would you feel able to stop work to do it?

The law behind this talk

Control of Asbestos Regulations 2012 (reg. 10 — information, instruction and training); Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 s.2(2)(c)

Employers must give workers comprehensible information, instruction and training on the risks they face — Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 s.2(2)(c) and Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999 reg. 10. Keep the record below as evidence that you did.

Attendance record

Topic

Asbestos Awareness: Disturb It and It Kills

Date

Site / location

Delivered by

Actions agreed

Next talk due

Attendees

Name

Signature

Use the Print handout button to print this record. General guidance only, not legal advice. This toolbox talk is generic material and is not a substitute for a suitable and sufficient risk assessment by a competent person. Employers remain responsible for their duties under the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act 1974 and the Management of Health and Safety at Work Regulations 1999.

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Asbestos Awareness

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HSE ADVISORY TEAM

0300 003 1747

hse.gov.uk

ACAS

0300 123 1100

acas.org.uk

CITIZENS ADVICE

0800 144 8848

citizensadvice.org.uk

UK WORK RIGHTS

Asbestos Awareness

ukworkrights.co.uk/toolbox-asbestos.html

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