



Asbestos in Commercial Properties: Managing the Risks and Responsibilities

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Introduction

The risks of asbestos have been known since the early 20th century. But despite the known health hazards that asbestos can cause, it remains a critical concern for commercial property owners and facility managers today. Many older buildings contain asbestos in insulation, roofing, flooring, and other materials. Renovations, demolitions, and natural disasters

can disturb these materials and release asbestos fibers into the air.

In this whitepaper, we'll review the uses of asbestos, its risks, legal and compliance requirements, scenarios requiring action, and best practices for handling and disposing of asbestos-containing materials.



What Is Asbestos?

Asbestos is an umbrella term for a group of naturally occurring fibrous silicate minerals.¹ Unearthed and mined worldwide, asbestos can be found in large deposits or as a contaminant in other materials, such as talc or vermiculite.

Asbestos is known for its resistance to heat, electricity, and corrosion.² These qualities made asbestos an attractive material for a variety of industrial and construction applications throughout the 20th century. Asbestos was used in a wide range of products, including insulation materials, fireproofing, cement products, and various construction materials.

COMMON ASBESTOS-CONTAINING PRODUCTS AND MATERIALS

- Adhesives
- Cement sheets
- Construction mastics
- Electrical components
- Fireproofing
- Gaskets
- Insulation
- Textiles
- Vinyl products

There are six types of asbestos, categorized into two groups.³



Serpentine Asbestos Fibers

These are long, flexible, and curved. The only type of serpentine asbestos is chrysotile, also known as white asbestos. Chrysotile is the most commonly used type of asbestos due to its desirable physical properties.



Amphibole Asbestos Fibers

These are straight and stiff with jagged edges, making them brittle and more likely to break. When disturbed, these fibers are more likely to break and release asbestos dust into the air.

There are five types of amphibole asbestos:

- Crocidolite
- Amosite
- Anthophyllite
- Tremolite
- Actinolite

The health risks associated with asbestos exposure have led to a significant decline in its use and the implementation of stringent regulations to protect public health.



What Are the Health Risks of Asbestos?

The primary concern with asbestos is its potential to cause severe health issues when its fibers are inhaled or ingested. Asbestos fibers are microscopic and can easily become airborne when asbestos-containing materials are disturbed. Once inhaled or ingested, these fibers can become lodged in the lungs or other tissues, causing inflammation and scarring and eventually leading to serious health conditions.⁴

Among the most severe health risks associated with asbestos exposure is mesothelioma, a rare and aggressive form of cancer that affects the lining of the lungs, abdomen, or heart. Asbestos exposure is the only known cause of mesothelioma. Lung cancer is another major risk, with asbestos exposure significantly increasing the likelihood of developing the disease.

In addition to cancer, asbestos exposure can cause several noncancerous conditions. For example, asbestosis is a chronic lung disease characterized by lung tissue scarring, leading to difficulty breathing and decreased lung function.

ASBESTOS-RELATED HEALTH CONDITIONS ⁵	
Cancerous Conditions	Noncancerous Conditions
Mesothelioma	Asbestosis
Lung Cancer	Pleural Plaques
Ovarian Cancer	Pleural Effusion
Laryngeal Cancer	Diffuse Pleural Thickening
	Pleurisy

These health issues can take decades to develop, meaning individuals exposed to asbestos many years ago may only now be experiencing symptoms. The long latency period of asbestos-related diseases makes it a persistent public health concern.



ASBESTOS MAINTENANCE IN BUILDINGS

Asbestos exposure is particularly dangerous in older buildings where asbestos-containing materials may deteriorate over time. Facility managers and property owners must be vigilant in maintaining these buildings to prevent accidental exposure. The risk is heightened in commercial properties due to the higher likelihood of maintenance, renovation, or demolition activities that could disturb asbestos-containing materials.

Certain materials, such as roofing materials, floor tiles, insulation, heating systems, and electrical components, are more likely to contain asbestos. Ensuring that these materials are properly managed and that appropriate precautions are taken during any work involving them is crucial to protecting building occupants and workers.

Asbestos exposure in the workplace is linked to serious health conditions, including lung cancer and mesothelioma, causing more than 200,000 deaths globally.⁶

What Laws and Regulations Govern Asbestos Abatement?

Asbestos use peaked in the mid-20th century before its health risks became widely recognized. Regulatory efforts to control and limit asbestos exposure began in the 1970s, with significant milestones including the Clean Air Act⁷ of 1970 and the Toxic Substances Control Act of 1976 (TSCA).⁸

The Clean Air Act identified asbestos as a hazardous air pollutant, leading to the implementation of regulations to limit its release into the environment. The TSCA gave the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) authority to regulate the manufacture, import, processing, distribution, and disposal of chemicals, including asbestos, that pose unreasonable health and environmental risks.

In 1989, the EPA issued a partial ban on asbestos, restricting the manufacture, import, processing, and distribution of several asbestos-containing products.⁹ This ban also prohibited new uses of asbestos to prevent introducing new asbestos-containing products into the marketplace.



Despite these regulatory efforts, asbestos has not been completely banned in the United States. Its use has sharply declined, but it is still present in many older buildings and materials. Regulatory oversight continues to evolve, with the EPA and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) playing key roles in enforcing asbestos regulations and protecting public health.

Here is a summary of key laws and regulations that these agencies enforce.

NATIONAL EMISSION STANDARDS FOR HAZARDOUS AIR POLLUTANTS (NESHAP)¹⁰

The EPA's NESHAP regulations under the Clean Air Act set standards for controlling asbestos emissions during demolition, renovation, and manufacturing. The rules require specific procedures to minimize asbestos release and mandate proper notification before any work on the property that could disrupt asbestos-containing materials begins.

Here are the steps that building owners and contractors must take:

1. Notification

Notify the appropriate state or local agency (often the state environmental protection agency) and the EPA at least 10 working days before any asbestos-related demolition or renovation. Include project details like location, operation type, asbestos amount, and activity dates.

2. Inspection

Conduct a thorough inspection using a qualified asbestos inspector before any renovation or demolition to determine the presence of asbestos-containing materials.

3. Containment

Contain the work area to prevent airborne fibers and limit spread to other areas. Seal the area with plastic sheeting and use negative air pressure systems. Asbestos-containing materials must be adequately wetted during removal.

4. Disposal

Handle asbestos waste carefully to avoid breakage and fiber release. Waste must be sealed in leak-tight containers with appropriate labeling and disposed of at an approved landfill that accepts asbestos waste.



5. Demolition Precautions

Remove materials containing asbestos before a building is demolished, if it is feasible to do so. Controlled removal reduces the risk of asbestos contamination.

6. Recordkeeping

Maintain thorough records of asbestos inspections, notifications, and waste disposal activities. These records must be available for review by regulatory agencies to ensure compliance with NESHAP requirements.

The failure to comply with NESHAP requirements can result in significant penalties, including fines and legal action. Noncompliance can also lead to increased health risks for workers and the public due to potential asbestos exposure.



ASBESTOS HAZARD EMERGENCY RESPONSE ACT (AHERA)

AHERA is part of the TSCA and focuses on asbestos management in schools. Requirements for schools include the following:¹¹

- Inspecting buildings for asbestos-containing materials
- Developing and maintaining asbestos management plans and keeping them available for review
- Taking appropriate response actions to prevent or reduce asbestos hazards
- Training and accrediting personnel performing asbestos-related work



ASBESTOS SCHOOL HAZARD ABATEMENT REAUTHORIZATION ACT (ASHARA)¹²

ASHARA is an amendment to AHERA that extends training and accreditation requirements to public and commercial buildings.

ASHARA also adds a training requirement: Individuals who perform asbestos inspections, management, and abatement activities in public and commercial buildings must be properly trained and accredited.



OSHA STANDARDS

OSHA's asbestos standards cover three primary industries: general industry, shipyards, and construction. These standards include permissible exposure limits (PELs) for asbestos, requirements for exposure assessment and monitoring, hazard communication, medical surveillance, and training. Employers in these industries must comply with OSHA's regulations to protect their workers from asbestos exposure.

General Industry Standard (29 CFR § 1910.1001)¹³

This standard applies to occupational exposure to asbestos in industries other than construction and shipyards, such as manufacturing, automotive repair, and custodial work.

- **Permissible Exposure Limit:** The maximum allowable concentration of asbestos fibers in the air is 0.1 fiber per cubic centimeter of air (f/cc) as an 8-hour time-weighted average.
- **Excursion Limit:** No employee exposure to asbestos shall exceed 1.0 f/cc averaged over a 30-minute period.
- **Exposure Monitoring:** Employers must conduct air monitoring to assess asbestos exposure levels and determine the effectiveness of control measures.
- **Engineering Controls and Work Practices:** Employers must use engineering controls (e.g., ventilation systems) and work practices (e.g., wet methods and HEPA vacuums) to reduce and maintain asbestos exposure below the PEL.
- **Respiratory Protection:** Employers must provide appropriate respiratory protection when engineering controls and work practices cannot reduce asbestos exposure to acceptable levels.
- **Medical Surveillance:** Employers must provide medical examinations and consultations for employees exposed above the PEL.
- **Training:** Employers must provide asbestos awareness training for workers exposed to asbestos at or above the PEL.
- **Housekeeping:** Facilities must follow strict procedures for cleaning asbestos-contaminated areas, including prohibiting the use of compressed air and dry sweeping.
- **Recordkeeping:** Employers must maintain records of exposure monitoring, medical surveillance, and training.





Construction Industry Standard (29 CFR § 1926.1101)¹⁴

This standard applies to asbestos exposure in construction work, including renovation, demolition, and maintenance activities involving asbestos-containing materials. The standard has similar requirements as the general industry standard. For example, it applies the same PEL and excursion limit as the general industry standard and requires training and housekeeping.

The construction industry standard classifies asbestos work into four categories based on the type of activity and potential exposure risk:

Class I	Class II
Removal of thermal system insulation (TSI) and surfacing asbestos-containing materials	Removal of other asbestos-containing materials, such as wallboard, floor tiles, and roofing materials
Class III	Class IV
Repair and maintenance operations where asbestos-containing materials are likely to be disturbed	Custodial activities involving contact with asbestos-containing materials or presumed asbestos-containing materials

The standard sets engineering controls and work practices for each class of work. Additional requirements include these:

- A “competent person” capable of identifying and remediating hazards must oversee asbestos work, ensure compliance with regulations, and conduct exposure assessments.
- Employers must provide and ensure the use of appropriate respiratory protection and personal protective equipment.
- Class I and II work requires employers to establish decontamination areas to prevent the spread of asbestos fibers.
- Employers must use signs and labels to warn of asbestos hazards and inform workers of the presence of asbestos or presumed asbestos.

Shipyard Employment Standard (29 CFR § 1915.1001)¹⁵

This standard applies to asbestos exposure in shipbuilding, ship repair, and shipbreaking activities. The requirements are largely the same as the other two standards.



LATEST REGULATORY UPDATES

On March 18, 2024, the EPA announced a final rule banning the ongoing use of chrysotile asbestos, the only form currently used in or imported to the United States, in products like asbestos diaphragms, sheet gaskets, brake blocks, and vehicle friction products.¹⁶ This was the first major asbestos ban in the U.S. since the 1991 court decision that struck down the EPA's previous attempt to ban asbestos.

In November 2024, the EPA found that old uses of asbestos, known as legacy uses, still pose serious health risks.¹⁷ Legacy uses include materials like floor and ceiling tiles, pipe wraps, insulation, and heat-resistant fabrics that were made with asbestos in the past. While these products are no longer made or sold, they may still be present in older buildings. The EPA also noted that if asbestos-containing materials, such as insulation, are in good condition and not disturbed, they do not pose a risk to people in or near the building.

Business owners and property managers must stay informed about current regulations and ensure that asbestos-containing materials in their buildings are properly managed and maintained. Noncompliance can result in significant legal and financial repercussions and endanger the health of building occupants and workers.

Approximately 125 million people are exposed to asbestos in the workplace.¹⁸



What Are the Proper Steps for Managing Asbestos?

Asbestos becomes a significant concern when disturbed during renovation, demolition, and maintenance work. Disturbing asbestos-containing materials can release fibers into the air, increasing the risk of exposure to building occupants and workers.

Things to Consider When Hiring an Asbestos Abatement Provider

Hire Only State-Licensed Contractors

Verify licenses and asbestos certification with your state contractor licensing board. Ensure they carry a valid license bond.

Get Multiple Bids

Request at least three competitive bids and three references per contractor. Review their past work carefully.

Demand Proper Documentation

- EPA and OSHA notification materials
- Job site log-in sheets
- Air and personnel monitoring reports
- Accident reports (if any)
- Hauling/disposal permits and information
- Final air monitoring report

Verify Insurance Coverage

Confirm the contractor carries workers' compensation insurance for all employees.



When Immediate Action Is Needed

Property owners and facility managers should take immediate action if asbestos-containing materials are damaged or deteriorating, if renovation or demolition projects are planned, or if there is a potential for asbestos exposure to building occupants.



Hiring a Licensed Asbestos Contractor

Hiring a licensed asbestos contractor is recommended for large areas (over 100 square feet) or complex projects. Contractors have the necessary training, certifications, and equipment to safely perform abatement and dispose of asbestos-containing materials. Licensed asbestos contractors must have proper training and certifications, comply with EPA and OSHA regulations, and carry appropriate insurance and worker's compensation coverage.



Managing Asbestos in Small Areas

For small areas (less than 100 square feet), property owners may consider handling asbestos abatement themselves. DIY asbestos removal is risky and should only be undertaken if absolutely necessary. It requires proper protective equipment (PPE), adherence to safety protocols, and a thorough understanding of the risks involved.



Identifying Asbestos-Containing Materials

Before you undertake any project in which you suspect the presence of asbestos, first try to determine whether the material contains asbestos. Avoid disturbing the material if at all possible. If you cannot determine whether the material contains asbestos from a label, the installer, or the manufacturer, it is best to assume that the product does contain asbestos.



Visual Inspections and Lab Testing

People who frequently have worked with asbestos material (such as plumbers, building contractors, and heating contractors) can often make a reasonable preliminary judgment about products that contain asbestos based on a visual inspection. In some cases, you may want to have the material analyzed, especially if you have a large area of damaged material or if you are preparing a major renovation that will expose material contained behind a wall.



1

ASSESS ASBESTOS RISKS IN THE FACILITY

The chosen provider should review historical inspections and reports and conduct inspections and tests to determine the presence and condition of asbestos-containing materials. An experienced professional can identify different forms of asbestos.

Keep in mind that asbestos fibers are microscopic and cannot be seen with the naked eye. The only sure way to identify asbestos is through professional inspection or laboratory testing.

2

DEVELOP AN ABATEMENT PLAN

Based on the inspection and risk assessment findings, the provider will develop an integrated abatement plan. This plan should outline: the scope of work, containment measures, removal methods, disposal procedures, and safety protocols.

3

ENSURE REGULATORY COMPLIANCE AND PERMITS

The provider should handle all permitting requirements. It should notify the appropriate regulatory authorities and ensure compliance with federal, state, and local regulations governing asbestos abatement. Abatement workers must be certified and wear appropriate PPE to minimize the risk of exposure to asbestos particles.

Appropriate PPE includes the following:

- Respirators
- Disposable coveralls
- Gloves
- Eye protection

4

IMPLEMENT CONTAINMENT STRATEGIES

The provider will contain the work area to prevent the spread of asbestos fibers. Physical barriers, negative air pressure systems, and HVAC system sealing should isolate hazards during the removal process.

**5**

ABATE THE ASBESTOS

The provider should remove all asbestos material using wet methods as mandated by the EPA. Wetted material should be removed and placed into properly labeled and sealed bags.

6

CLEANING AND DECONTAMINATION

The provider should clean the work area using wet methods and HEPA vacuums to eliminate asbestos fibers. Hand brushing can get to fibers that may be lodged in grooves or crevices. After brushing, the provider should wipe down the substrate to ensure that all loose fibers have been eliminated.

The provider should also conduct continuous air monitoring throughout the abatement process to ensure that levels of asbestos fibers remain within acceptable limits.

7

VISUAL INSPECTION AND ENCAPSULATION

The provider should work with an independent industrial hygienist to perform a visual inspection and look for any residual contamination. After approval, the provider should spray surfaces with a liquid encapsulant to control the future release of airborne fibers.

8

SPRAYBACK OR REINSULATION

The next step is often to reapply a substitute for the asbestos-containing material that was originally present. In most cases, the original asbestos-containing material was probably used as fireproofing, thermal system insulation, condensation control, or acoustical insulation. Therefore, it is imperative that the substitute material (sprayback) be capable of the same functions and have similar functional properties to the original asbestos-containing material. The provider should help you choose the proper material during the project's planning stage.



9

DISPOSE OF WASTE

Property owners are legally responsible for ensuring that asbestos waste is properly packaged, transported, and disposed of throughout the job. Your provider should place all asbestos waste in properly labeled bags and hire a certified hazardous waste hauler to dispose of it at EPA-approved landfills to prevent environmental contamination and public health risks.

10

FINAL INSPECTION AND CLEARANCE TESTING

After the work is completed, the area must be visually inspected, and an independent industrial hygienist should collect samples to confirm that asbestos levels are below regulatory thresholds. When the air sampling results indicate that airborne fiber concentration meets the criteria for clearance, the provider should remove all sealing and protective barriers.

The cleanup process should be documented thoroughly, including inspection reports, abatement plans, air monitoring results, and disposal records. This report serves as a record of compliance and provides a detailed account of the work performed.

By choosing a professional team that follows best practices, property owners can effectively manage asbestos-related risks.

How ATI Can Help

With more than 70 locations nationwide, ATI Restoration provides comprehensive [asbestos abatement services](#) for commercial properties throughout the United States. Our technicians are specially trained to fully and safely remove hazardous materials. We understand the risks associated with asbestos exposure and employ specialized techniques to minimize the release of dust and particles into the air. Our goal is to ensure that all materials are securely contained to prevent the spread of asbestos fibers.

[Contact us today to learn more.](#)



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