Know the Risks of Asbestos Exposure



Safety Talk

What's at Stake?

Although asbestos has been banned for many uses, because of its widespread use in the past, it remains present in older construction, fireproofing and insulation, and other products that contain asbestos. That's why you need to know something about asbestos, particularly if you work in construction, maintenance or demolition. Off-the-job renovation of houses, antiques or vehicles can also put you at risk.

What's the Danger?

When asbestos or asbestos-containing products break apart, they release tiny fibers that can be breathed in. These fibers lodge in the lung where they can cause diseases such as asbestosis, lung cancer, and mesothelioma.

Asbestosis is a chronic respiratory condition. The inhaled fibers irritate the lung tissues and cause scarring. Symptoms include shortness of breath and a crackling sound in the lungs when inhaling. The disease is disabling and usually fatal. Workers who have renovated or demolished buildings containing asbestos may be at risk.

Lung cancer is the leading cause of death from asbestos exposure. Mining, milling, manufacturing, and the use of asbestos and asbestos containing products puts a worker at risk. Symptoms include a cough, change in breathing, and shortness of breath. Smoking in combination with asbestos exposure increases risk of lung cancer.

Lastly, mesothelioma is a rare form of cancer, usually occurring in the lining of the lungs, chest or abdomen. It is almost always linked to asbestos exposure. At risk are miners and textile workers.

How to Protect Yourself

The first step in protecting yourself is to understand where asbestos can be found. Such as, floor tiles, fire doors, pipe and boiler wrap, cementing compounds used in plumbing, older shingles and siding, brake linings and clutch pedals.

The next step is to know what operations will cause asbestos fibers to break apart, crumble, or otherwise become airborne. This is when you are in danger of breathing the fibers in. Drilling, grinding, buffing, cutting, sawing, and striking, all have the potential to release asbestos fibers from asbestos-containing materials.

The final step in protecting yourself? If you suspect the presence of asbestos, report it immediately to your supervisor. Only a qualified, licensed contractor should identify, handle, remove, and dispose of asbestos containing material. Isolate the area in the meantime to prevent others from possible exposure.

Final Word

To protect yourself and others from asbestos exposure, you need to know where asbestos is likely to be found and understand what processes make it dangerous.