

WHY ASBESTOS IS DANGEROUS

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Asbestos was the main cause of occupational ill health in the second half of the century. Studies show that 2000-3000 people are dying from asbestos related cancer every year.

We, in Sri Lanka, are still using asbestos, releasing asbestos fibres to the air and producing air-borne asbestos fibres, which can be absorbed by the body, every time a person breathes them in.

What is Asbestos?

Asbestos is the term used for the fibrous forms of several naturally occurring minerals. There are three main types of Asbestos and are commonly known as:

- *Crocidolite- Blue Asbestos*
- *Amosite- Brown Asbestos*
- *Chrysotile- White Asbestos*

All types of Asbestos are dangerous but blue and brown are known to be more dangerous. However, the different types cannot be usually be identified by the colour alone. Laboratory analyses are required to analyse fibres.

How could Asbestos Affect People?

Breathing Asbestos fibres can lead people to develop one of these fatal diseases.

- *Lung Cancer*
- *Asbestosis – scarring of the lung*
- *Mesothelioma- lining around the lung and stomach*

These diseases can take from 15-60 years to develop.

In general, the likelihood is that people may develop one of the above diseases will increase with:

- The type of the asbestos fibres that they are exposed to.
- The amount of fibres they inhale.
- The number of times they exposed
- Smoking
- Age

Asbestos fibres enter the body when a person breathes in. The body can get rid of the larger fibres but microscopic fibres can pass into the lungs causing diseases.

The body will naturally eliminate any asbestos fibres taken with food and water and asbestos fibres cannot be absorbed through the skin.

It is important to remember however, that people who smoke and are exposed to asbestos fibres are at greater risk of developing lung cancer than people who do not smoke.

An important fact to note is that people will not be exposed to asbestos fibres unless the material is disturbed.

So which people are most at risk?

- Asbestos Manufacturing operatives and people who live in the vicinity of the factory.
- Building operatives who work with asbestos on constructions and/or maintenance workers and people live in the vicinity.

It is disturbing to note that white asbestos is being imported and readily available in Sri Lanka and it is widely used on roofs and ceilings.

Typical -Tasks and Exposure to White Asbestos fibres.

Task	Exposure Level (Fibres per millilitre- f/ml)
Drilling	up to 10
Use of jig saw or similar	up to 20
Hand sawing	up to 10
Use of circular saws	up to 20

Control limits and action levels are required for use of white asbestos, if the fibre release is 0.3 f/ml at 4 hours or .0.09 m/fl at 10 minutes.

This figure shows how dangerous white asbestos is.

Control Limits means operatives who work with asbestos should wear Personal Protective Equipments- P P E and these includes disposable overalls with hoods, footwear, RPE- Disposable Respiratory Protective Equipment, Clearance testing by air monitoring, Enclosures, decontaminating units and training for operatives

Waste Disposal

Asbestos waste disposal should be carried out again in a controlled manner by specialist contractors, using sealed waste bags and this waste must be deposited in a licensed site.

Air Monitoring

Where asbestos is used, air monitoring is essential to monitor fibre contents in the air.

In England, Asbestos Prohibition Regulation was imposed by prohibiting importation, supply and use of all forms of asbestos. Blue and Brown Asbestos were banned in 1985 and the remaining use of white asbestos was banned in 1999. It is therefore, illegal to import, supply and use of any asbestos or new products containing asbestos.

In 2002, Control of Asbestos at work Regulation came into force providing owners' duties for managing asbestos if present on their premises. This means, owners should identify the presence of asbestos or asbestos related products and inform any operative who comes to carry out works on the premises, regarding the existence of asbestos. If asbestos needs to be removed then this should be carried out under controlled manner as specified in the regulation. This regulation started with Commercial Properties and has been extended to non-commercial properties. This also provides duties to Employers and Employees.

Under this regulation, operatives involved in Asbestos removal works under controlled conditions should undergo a medical check up at every two years and records relating asbestos works need to be retained for at least forty years.

What Actions need to be taken.

The Sri Lankan government should consider banning the importation and supply of asbestos and building materials containing asbestos. Then introduce Controls for managing and removal of asbestos.

Remember, asbestos is dangerous if disturbed. This means, existing asbestos roofs or ceilings and/or products containing asbestos need not be removed, but precautions should be taken against asbestos fibres if damaged or otherwise disturbed. Furthermore, future use of asbestos needs to be banned in order to protect people against various forms of cancer.

If existing asbestos is disturbed or if asbestos is used for new works, the presence of asbestos can only be confirmed by bulk sampling and analysis by an accredited laboratory.