
Toxic Substances



School Asbestos Program

Questions & Answers

EPA/740/K-97/001



This booklet contains questions and answers designed to assist State health and education officials, school administrators, parents, students and others interested in understanding the Environmental Protection Agency's School Asbestos Program.

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EPA's SCHOOL ASBESTOS PROGRAM

1. Q: Why is EPA Concerned About Asbestos-Containing Materials in Schools?

A: EPA is concerned because asbestos-containing materials can release asbestos fibers into a school's air where the fibers can be inhaled. Exposure to asbestos fibers can cause debilitating or fatal diseases. Asbestos-containing materials were used in constructing or renovating many schools (and other buildings) throughout the nation.

2. Q: What is EPA Doing About Asbestos-Containing Materials in Schools?

A: EPA has organized a joint Federal, State and local effort to identify and correct exposure problems caused by asbestos-containing materials in schools. EPA's primary activities will be to provide technical assistance to States and school districts and to act as an information clearinghouse for Federal and State agencies and for schools.

3. Q: What Kinds of Technical Assistance is EPA Providing?

A: EPA has prepared a Guidance Package that explains a step-by-step procedure for identifying and correcting exposure

problems caused by asbestos-containing materials. This Guidance Package will be distributed, either directly or through State asbestos program agencies, to public school districts throughout the nation in early spring 1979. An EPA contractor has produced a videotape which highlights the procedures explained in the Guidance Package. Copies of this tape are available for loan from EPA's ten Regional offices. At each Regional office there is a specially trained individual, the Regional Asbestos Coordinator, who will provide additional technical assistance where needed.

4. Q: How is EPA Acting as an Information Clearinghouse?

A: In October 1978 EPA conducted a telephone survey to learn of State and local efforts to identify asbestos-containing materials in schools and to correct exposure problems caused by those materials. EPA has included a reporting form in its Guidance Package and will use the information submitted on those reporting forms to update the results of EPA's survey. The data collected by EPA will be available to State and local officials upon request.

5. Q: Why Did EPA Become Involved?

A: The October 1978 survey revealed a need by the States and school districts for technical assistance. There were

few documents that provided guidance and few experts to whom concerned officials could go for advice. Many State and local officials asked EPA to provide guidance documents and stated that they would start or improve school asbestos programs after receiving those documents. The Guidance Package provides the information that State or school officials will need to have effective school asbestos programs.

6. Q: Why Doesn't EPA Regulate?

A: Developing and promulgating a rule could take a long time, probably 12 to 18 months. The EPA program provides States and school districts with the technical information they need to establish or improve their own programs and allows flexibility in dealing with the problem. EPA has the option to regulate if the Agency identifies serious problems in schools that are not being corrected.

7. Q: Are Other Federal Agencies Concerned About Asbestos In Schools?

A: Yes, EPA's program is coordinated with the National Institute for Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS), the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), and the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC).

BACKGROUND ON ASBESTOS

8. Q: What is Asbestos?

A: Asbestos is a term used for a group of naturally occurring minerals that separate into fibers. Asbestos fibers are incombustible and cannot be destroyed or degraded easily. All forms of asbestos have a tendency to break into a dust of tiny fibers that can float in the air and be inhaled or swallowed.

9. Q: Why is Asbestos Hazardous?

A: Epidemiological studies of asbestos workers have shown that exposure to asbestos increases the risks of developing lung cancer, mesothelioma (cancer of the lining of the lung and abdomen), and asbestosis (chronic lung disease).

10. Q: Is any Exposure to Asbestos Hazardous?

A: EPA believes that any exposure to asbestos involves some increase of risk. No safe level of exposure or "threshold" level has ever been established. It is impossible to estimate confidently the exact degree of risk associated with low-level exposures.

11. Q: How Long is the Latency Period for Asbestos-Related Disease?

A: The time between the first exposure to asbestos and the development of asbestos-related disease is called the latency period. The latency period for asbestos-induced disease is generally 15 to 35 years. The length of the latency period depends upon the amount and duration of exposure.

12. Q: Does Cigarette Smoking Increase a Person's Vulnerability to Asbestos-Related Disease?

A: Yes, asbestos exposure and cigarette smoking together produce more lung cancer than either factor acting alone.

13. Q: How is Asbestos Used?

A: Asbestos has about 3000 different uses. It makes an excellent fireproofing or insulating material. Manufactured products with asbestos include reinforced asbestos cement sheets and pipes, patching and taping compounds, floor tiles, clutch facings, brake linings, and pipe insulation.

14. Q: Do all of These Products Cause Exposure Problems?

A: NO. The important question is how easily will the material release asbestos fibers. Materials which can

be crumbled in the hand are termed FRIABLE. If friable asbestos-containing material is subject to pressure or vibration, it can release asbestos fibers which can be inhaled. In some asbestos-containing materials, such as vinyl floor tile, the asbestos fibers are firmly bound together or encased. These materials will not release asbestos fibers unless they are cut, ground, or sanded.

ASBESTOS-CONTAINING MATERIALS IN SCHOOLS

15. Q: What Kinds of Asbestos-Containing Materials in Schools is EPA Concerned About?

A: EPA is concerned about friable asbestos-containing materials that were used for fireproofing, insulation, or decoration. Friable materials are usually found on overhead surfaces, steel beams, and ceilings and occasionally on walls and pipes.

16. Q: Were All Friable Asbestos-Containing Materials Applied by Spraying?

A: Most were applied by spraying, but some were applied by troweling. The sprayed materials are usually friable. The materials which were applied by troweling vary from soft to hard. Hard materials are not friable, but they may release asbestos fibers if damaged.

17. Q: How Serious a Problem do These Friable Materials Present?

A: The problem varies significantly from building to building depending on the condition of the material, its accessibility, and other factors.

18. Q: How Extensive is the Problem?

A: EPA does not know how many schools have asbestos exposure problems. This information will become available as schools are inspected and the inspection results are reported to EPA. The October 1978 survey indicates that about 5% of the public schools in the country have been inspected. Those States that inspected all (or nearly all) schools reported asbestos-containing materials present in 1%-5% of their schools.

ANSWERS TO FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

19. Q: What Steps Does the Guidance Package Recommend?

A: The steps are: (1) visually inspect the building for material which might contain asbestos, (2) take bulk samples of suspect material, (3) have the bulk samples analyzed, (4) if there is asbestos-containing material, perform an exposure assessment to determine if there is an exposure problem, and (5) perform corrective action if necessary.

20. Q: Is EPA Going to Inspect Schools?

A: EPA does not have the manpower to inspect all of the nation's schools. Schools should be inspected by school officials or State officials. EPA personnel will provide advice where needed on how to inspect.

21. Q: Will School Records Indicate Whether Asbestos-Containing Materials Were Used in the School?

A: Sometimes. Check building records to supplement a visual inspection, but do not rely on records instead of inspecting.

22. Q: Can Asbestos-Containing Material be Identified Solely by Visual Inspection?

A: No. If you suspect that a material contains asbestos, you must have a sample analyzed in order to be certain that it does contain asbestos. Some materials that do not contain asbestos look virtually identical to materials that do contain asbestos.

23. Q: Will Air Sampling Indicate Whether a School Has an Exposure Problem Caused by Asbestos-Containing Material?

A: Air sampling measures the number of fibers in the air at the time the sample was taken. It does not

distinguish asbestos fibers from other types of fibers or reveal the source of the fibers. Therefore, air sampling should not be substituted for inspection, sampling, analysis, and exposure assessment.

24. Q: If Laboratory Analysis Establishes that a School has Asbestos-Containing Material, What Should the School do?

A: The school should perform an exposure assessment to determine if there is an exposure problem. Based on the exposure assessment the school may decide to perform a corrective action or to defer action.

25. Q: What Kinds of Corrective Actions can be Taken?

A: The asbestos-containing material can be removed, encapsulated with a sealant, or enclosed with a barrier which separates the material from the building environment.

26. Q: Are Specially Trained People Needed To Perform Corrective Actions?

A: Yes. Performance of corrective actions is governed by EPA and OSHA regulations. Poorly performed work can create a greater exposure hazard than it eliminates. Therefore, workers

should be familiar with the hazards of exposure to asbestos, what EPA and OSHA regulations require, and how to use respirators and other safety equipment.

27. Q: Is Asbestos Exposure from Friable Asbestos-Containing Materials a Problem Found only in Public Schools?

A: No. EPA's program focuses on public schools, but friable asbestos-containing materials are just as likely to be found in private schools, universities, commercial buildings, and residential buildings as in public schools. EPA's Guidance Package will be useful to any building owner who suspects that his building has asbestos-containing materials.

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

28. Q: How Can I Get a Copy of the Guidance Package?

A: Call toll free 800-424-9065. (In the Washington, D.C. area call 554-1404).

29. Q: How Can I Get More Information On Asbestos-Containing Materials in Schools?

A: In general, the best people to contact are your EPA Regional Asbestos Coordinator or someone in your State

asbestos program agency. To get the names of people to call, look in the Guidance Package or call 800-424-9065 (in the Washington, D.C. area, call 554-1404.)

30. Q: How Can I Obtain More Information On Health Risks Associated With Asbestos?

A: Write to ASBESTOS, National Cancer Institute, Bethesda, Maryland, 20205, or call 800-638-6694. (In Maryland call 800-492-6600)

31. Q: How Can I Obtain Information on Asbestos in Consumer Products?

A: Call the Consumer Product Safety Commission:

800-638-8326 (most of U.S.)

800-492-8363 (Maryland)

800-638-8333 (Alaska, Hawaii, Puerto Rico, Virgin Islands)

