

Asbestos-related disease caused by past exposure to the fibrous mineral is currently responsible for up to 3,500 deaths a year, making it the country's biggest work-related killer.

The current Control of Asbestos Regulations define how asbestos should be managed, and make it mandatory for only competent, trained and approved licensed contractors to remove asbestos as the killer substance is still present and still a threat.

Getting into the body – Asbestos fibres enter the body through the nose and mouth, not through the skin. The body naturally gets rid of most fibres you might take in with food and water but tiny fibres may remain and those can pass into the lung where, over time, they can cause disease. It is because fibres can remain there for so long that small but repeated exposure can lead to the development of an asbestos-related disease for which there is no cure. It is vital to prevent or control exposure on every single job.

Where is it found in buildings? – Asbestos and asbestos-containing materials (ACMs) may be found in any building built or refurbished before blue and brown asbestos were banned in 1985.

Some asbestos-containing materials such as asbestos cement were still used until 1999.

In the case of final demolition or major refurbishment, the plan of work must specify that all asbestos is removed before any other major work begins where this is reasonably practicable, and does not cause a greater risk to employees than if the asbestos had been left in place.

Protecting yourself – If site managers of a demolition project establish, after a thorough risk assessment, that no work needs to be carried out by a specialist asbestos removal contractor, they should then assess the risks to workers' health from the work that needs to be done and agree what precautions need to be taken. These include:

- Stopping work if you find any material you suspect may contain asbestos.
- Using the personal protective equipment given to you, including a suitable face mask.
- Washing before you take a break and at the end of the day's work.

- Putting asbestos waste in a suitable sealed container. Asbestos waste needs to be taken to a licensed tip.

Training – Current legislation requires training to be given to any employee whose work could foreseeably expose them to asbestos, including workers in the refurbishment and maintenance trades.

More information on managing asbestos and HSE's recent 'Don't take the gamble' campaign can be found at www.hse.gov.uk/asbestos.