

UNB ASBESTOS FACT SHEET No. 1

WHAT IS ASBESTOS?

Asbestos is the name given to a group of minerals which occur naturally as masses of long silky fibres that can be woven together or used to reinforce other materials. Prized for its special properties of being resistant to abrasion, inert to acid and alkaline solutions, and stable at high temperatures, asbestos was once widely used in construction and industry, and it is still used in a number of applications where its special characteristics make it hard to replace.

There are three main types of asbestos fibres:

- Chrysotile or White Asbestos: with fine, silky, flexible white fibres, chrysotile was the most commonly used asbestos in the United States and Canada. Although current evidence suggests that chrysotile may be less hazardous than other kinds of asbestos, it is still considered a carcinogen.
- Amosite or Brown Asbestos: straight, brittle fibres that are light grey to pale brown, amosite was the most commonly used form of asbestos in thermal system insulation.
- Crocidolite or Blue Asbestos: straight blue fibres that were once used in fabrics used in high-temperature insulation.

There are also other types of asbestos fibres including anthophyllite, tremolite, and actinolite, which are found as contaminants with other building materials.

WHY CAN ASBESTOS BE A PROBLEM?

Asbestos can be a problem because, as a toxic substance and a known carcinogen, it can cause several serious diseases in humans. Symptoms of these diseases typically develop over a period of years following asbestos exposure. Asbestos was once widely used in building materials and can still be found in most buildings constructed before the 1980's. Asbestos that is managed properly and maintained in good condition appears to pose relatively little risk, (USEPA) and the health risk is considered minimal for asbestos materials in good condition in an inaccessible location and protected from damage. (Alberta Human Resources and Employment). However, where conditions exist that could allow asbestos fibres to be pulverized and suspended in the air, people could be exposed to the fibres. Where damage can be controlled or prevented, managing the exposure risk is often the most cost-effective control measure. (Alberta Human Resources and Employment).

WHAT KINDS OF MATERIALS COULD CONTAIN ASBESTOS?

Asbestos containing materials can be classified into three types: sprayed or trowelled-on material; thermal system insulation; or other miscellaneous materials.

1. Sprayed or trowelled-on materials were sometimes used on ceilings or walls. These surfacing materials may be found as a white, popcorn textured decorative, acoustical, and fireproofing cover in homes, buildings, and schools.
2. Thermal system insulation is often found as asbestos-containing plaster cement wrap around boilers, on water and steam pipe elbows, tees, fittings, and pipe runs. Asbestos may also be found on duct systems, and as a cardboard type of material (called aircell) found on steam pipe runs.
3. Miscellaneous material includes all materials containing asbestos which were not included in the above groups. These materials could include floor tile, plasterboard, ceiling tiles, automotive friction products, rubber tile matting, rubber stair treading and risers, acoustical panels and sound proofing, gasket material, stage curtains, roofing materials, transite siding, caulking, cement pipe, kiln insulation, electrical panel insulation and wiring, fire brick, tar, and others.

All three types of ACM are found on the UNB Fredericton campus, just as they would be found in many other institutional buildings or homes of similar age, since many of the facilities were built prior to the time that government controls were placed on the use of asbestos in construction materials. Intact and undisturbed asbestos presents no direct health hazard but does present a potential exposure hazard should fibres be released and inhaled (Alberta Human Resources and Employment).

WHAT IS UNB DOING TO MANAGE ASBESTOS?

The University has procedures in place to protect employees, students, and the public from exposure to asbestos. Where buildings or other structures contain asbestos, the asbestos is inspected/monitored to ensure that it remains in good condition.

Where friable asbestos is found, it may be removed, encapsulated, or enclosed by qualified contractors, to ensure that asbestos fibres are not released to the air. Following this, testing is conducted to ensure that the amount of asbestos in the air is at a safe level. This process is part of the University's Asbestos Management Plan, which falls under provincial regulations.

WHO CAN ANSWER MY QUESTIONS ABOUT ASBESTOS?

UNBF Faculty and Staff who have concerns regarding any potential exposure to asbestos should discuss them with their Supervisor or Department Head. Any concerns regarding the building and the location of asbestos containing materials should be directed to Capital Planning & Operations (Work Control Centre 453-4889; fm@unb.ca). The Environmental Health and Safety Office (EHS, 453-5075; safety@unb.ca) may also be contacted at any time by Students, Faculty and Staff for information on the risks associated with asbestos in the workplace.

Additional information can be obtained from the websites listed below, including the and Health Canada and US EPA.

<https://www.ccohs.ca/oshanswers/chemicals/asbestos/>

<http://www.epa.gov/asbestos/>