

Don't mess with asbestos

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In recent months there have been reports of hazardous asbestos abatement incidents in several BC health care facilities and labs.

This is potentially exposing workers and members of the public to deadly asbestos fibres.

It's estimated that more than 145,000 Canadian workers are exposed to asbestos in their workplaces every year and it's now the leading cause of work related death in this country. Since 1996, asbestos-related disease has accounted for approximately one third of all workplace deaths. In British Columbia, asbestos has been identified as the cause in 77 workplace deaths in 2014 and the numbers are increasing.

Prior to 1990, asbestos was widely used as a building material in BC and many older health care facilities and labs still contain significant amounts of the substance. Due to a latency period of between 20 to 50 years for asbestos related diseases to develop, it's expected the death rate will continue to climb for several more years.

Since asbestos containing material is so prevalent in many of our workplaces, it's important to be aware of proper safety protocols in order to prevent exposure. Asbestos is a hazard to health when the fibers are disturbed and become airborne. This means that it poses health risks only when fibres are present in the air and you breathe them into your lungs. Fibres are released when asbestos-containing products break down. This release can happen through deterioration or when the material is cut or disturbed, such as during renovations.

Any time renovations are planned in work areas constructed prior to 1990, your workplace joint occupational health and safety representative or OHS steward should be notified to ensure your employer is following proper asbestos identification and abatement protocols.

USEFUL LINKS

WorkSafeBC provides information on asbestos risks, risk mitigation and resources:

<https://www.worksafebc.com/en/health-safety/hazards-exposures/asbestos>

HealthLinkBC provides medical, personal and home safety information about asbestos here:

<http://www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthfiles/hfile32.stm>

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