Toolbox talk

Asbestos awareness

The hidden killer: know where it hides, stop if in doubt

10 minutes

For: Anyone who could disturb the fabric of a building built or refurbished before 2000

Why it matters

HSE says around 5,000 people die every year from asbestos-related diseases, the biggest cause of work-related deaths in Great Britain. Maintenance, refurbishment, demolition and installation workers are most at risk. The diseases can take decades to show, so you will not know you have breathed it in until it is too late.

Key points

1. Asbestos can be in any building built or refurbished before 2000.
2. It is only dangerous when fibres get into the air, for example by cutting, drilling or breaking it.
3. Common places: insulating board, lagging, sprayed coatings, cement roof sheets, floor tiles and textured coatings like Artex.
4. It can be hidden inside walls, floors and ceilings, even where a survey exists.
5. Before work starts, the asbestos register or survey should be checked and cover your work area.
6. If you suspect asbestos: stop work, do not disturb it, tell your supervisor.
7. Higher-risk work, like lagging, sprayed coatings and most insulating board removal, needs an HSE-licensed contractor.
8. Awareness training helps you spot and avoid asbestos. It does not allow you to work on it.

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Go further: Read the Tradefox guide to asbestos awareness in construction

Sources: HSE: A worker's guide to asbestos safety; HSE: Locations of asbestos and taking the right action; HSE: Asbestos FAQs; HSE: Cancer and construction - Asbestos.

This talk supports, but does not replace, your site-specific risk assessment, method statement, training and supervision. Free to copy and use. **tradefoxapp.com/toolbox-talks/asbestos**

Asbestos awareness

Do

- Ask to see the asbestos register or survey before you start work.
- Treat any suspect material as asbestos until it is confirmed otherwise.
- Stop work straight away and tell your supervisor if you find something suspicious.
- Check the register covers the exact area you are working in.
- Make sure you have had asbestos awareness training if your work could disturb building fabric.

Don't

- Don't drill, cut, sand or break anything you think could contain asbestos.
- Don't start work until the register or survey has been checked.
- Don't try to clean up suspect debris yourself. Stop and report it.
- Don't assume a building is clear just because it looks modern or newly decorated.
- Don't do asbestos work you are not trained for. If in doubt, assume it is licensed work and stop.

Ask the group

- Where on this job could we come across asbestos, and how do we check?
- Has anyone seen the asbestos register for this site? What does it say about our work areas?
- What would you do if you drilled into a board and weren't sure what it was?
- Who do you tell on this site, and how do we stop others walking into the area?

If it goes wrong: If suspect material is disturbed, stop work immediately and tell your supervisor straight away so HSE's accidental disturbance guidance can be followed. If you are worried about exposure, see your GP and ask them to note it in your records.

On this site

Nearest first aider _____

Emergency assembly point _____

Site-specific hazards and controls _____

_____

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Attendance register

Asbestos awareness

Site / project

Date and time

Presented by

Company

	Name (print)	Company	Signature
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			
8			
9			
10			
11			
12			
13			
14			

By signing, attendees confirm they took part in this toolbox talk and understood the key points. Keep this record with your site safety file.

Presenter signature

Follow-up actions

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Quick check

Asbestos awareness

Tick one answer for each question. Your presenter has the answers.

Name _____ Date _____

1. Buildings built or refurbished before which year could contain asbestos?

- [ ] 1980
- [ ] 2000
- [ ] 2015

2. When is asbestos dangerous?

- [ ] When fibres get into the air and are breathed in
- [ ] Only when it is wet
- [ ] Whenever it is in the building, even undisturbed

3. You uncover a board you think could be asbestos. What first?

- [ ] Break off a piece to check
- [ ] Finish the job quickly
- [ ] Stop work, leave it alone, tell your supervisor

4. What does asbestos awareness training let you do?

- [ ] Remove asbestos insulating board
- [ ] Recognise asbestos and avoid disturbing it
- [ ] Remove pipe lagging

5. Who must remove sprayed coatings and pipe lagging?

- [ ] An HSE-licensed contractor
- [ ] Any trained site worker
- [ ] The building owner

Sources: HSE: A worker's guide to asbestos safety; HSE: Locations of asbestos and taking the right action; HSE: Asbestos FAQs; HSE: Cancer and construction - Asbestos.

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For the presenter

Answers and sources

Quick check answers

1. 2000

HSE says asbestos can be found in any building built or refurbished before 2000.

2. When fibres get into the air and are breathed in

The risk comes when fibres are released, for example by drilling, cutting or damage.

3. Stop work, leave it alone, tell your supervisor

Stop, don't disturb it and report it. Assume it is asbestos until confirmed otherwise.

4. Recognise asbestos and avoid disturbing it

HSE says awareness training does not allow you to work on asbestos.

5. An HSE-licensed contractor

This is high-risk work and needs an HSE-licensed contractor.

Sources

- HSE: A worker's guide to asbestos safety
  https://www.hse.gov.uk/asbestos/workers.htm
- HSE: Locations of asbestos and taking the right action
  https://www.hse.gov.uk/asbestos/location-materials.htm
- HSE: Asbestos FAQs
  https://www.hse.gov.uk/asbestos/faq.htm
- HSE: Cancer and construction - Asbestos
  https://www.hse.gov.uk/construction/healthrisks/cancer-and-construction/asbestos.htm

> **Presenting tips:** keep it to about 10 minutes, use real examples from your site, ask the group questions rather than reading everything out, and record attendance on the register.

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Asbestos: stop if in doubt

1. **Check the asbestos register before work**
2. **Suspect it? Stop and don't disturb**
3. **Tell your supervisor straight away**

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Asbestos: stop if in doubt

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Sources and qualifications

Asbestos awareness

Scope: Great Britain safety legislation unless a nation is identified. Northern Ireland has separate legislation. Site rules can be stricter than minimum legal duties; use the site assessment, instructions and competent supervision.

A4 applicability: no installation-design requirement is asserted in this talk. Its claims are referenced to the subject-specific sources below.

S1. HSE: Asbestos - workers

Disease burden, pre-2000 buildings, planning, checking the register/survey, stopping if suspect material is found and training limitations.

https://www.hse.gov.uk/asbestos/workers.htm

S2. HSE: Locations and materials

Examples of asbestos-containing materials, concealed material and selecting the appropriate work controls.

https://www.hse.gov.uk/asbestos/location-materials.htm

S3. HSE: Asbestos FAQs

Accidental disturbance, reporting exposure and the distinction between awareness training and competence for asbestos work; Do/Don't, emergency and quiz.

https://www.hse.gov.uk/asbestos/faq.htm