

# Firefighter FAQs on Asbestos

## What is Asbestos?

Asbestos is a naturally occurring mineral that was commonly mixed with a variety of construction materials because of its properties including resistance to heat, tensile strength and insulating capabilities. The health risks of asbestos began to surface in the early to mid 1970s and by 1980 it had been phased out of most commercial and industrial applications. However the material may still be present in many buildings built before 1980 due to the high cost of asbestos removal / abatement.

## What is the difference between asbestos removal and asbestos abatement?

If a building has had asbestos removed it means that it is no longer present in the structure. If a building has undergone asbestos abatement that means the material has been removed or sealed within a protective material to prevent it from being released.

## How can I be exposed to asbestos during a fire?

Asbestos exposure is unlikely to occur during the initial firefighting stages when firefighters are wearing respirators which prevents asbestos from being inhaled. However during a fire asbestos containing materials might disintegrate from the fire itself or from water when it makes contact with hot material. It might also be released into the air in the case of structural failure. The fibers are not combustible and can linger in the air during the overhaul stage of a fire when firefighters extinguish remaining hotspots and check to make sure fire isn't burning in other places.

## Is asbestos more likely to be present in certain structures?

Asbestos was used in a number of building products. While there is no definitive way to tell whether a material does contain asbestos there are some clues after a fire. If certain parts of a structure are in much better relative condition than other parts, its likely that asbestos could be present. If you encounter any areas like that make sure you let someone know.

## What are the health risks of asbestos exposure?

Asbestos fibers can enter the lungs and become trapped which can lead to scarring. Overtime this can increase the risk of developing conditions like mesothelioma or asbestosis or lung cancer but that risk depends on the nature of exposure.

## Can a one-time exposure increase my risk of cancer?

Patients diagnosed with asbestos related diseases usually have a pattern of asbestos exposure. Thus it is unlikely that a one time exposure event will lead to the development of cancer but we advise that if you have been exposed to asbestos that you speak with a doctor.

## What should I do if asbestos fibers may present on my equipment?

We recommend that equipment be washed with water immediately to remove as many fibers as possible. If this cannot be done on scene, then we advise that this be done as soon as you return to the firehouse.

[Prepared by MesotheliomaWeb.org](http://MesotheliomaWeb.org)