

WHO position on Asbestos

What is asbestos?

The term asbestos refers to a group of naturally occurring fibrous minerals. The principal forms of asbestos are chrysotile (white asbestos) and crocidolite (blue asbestos). Other forms are amosite, anthophyllite, tremolite and actinolite.

Asbestos has been used for insulation in buildings and as an ingredient in a number of products, such as

roofing, water supply lines, fire blankets, plastic fillers, and medical packing, as well as clutches and

brake linings, gaskets and pads for automobiles.

Key facts on asbestos exposure:

- About 125 million people in the world are exposed to asbestos at the workplace.
- According to WHO estimates, more than 107 000 people die each year from asbestos-related lung cancer, mesothelioma and asbestosis resulting from occupational exposure.
- One in every three deaths from occupational cancer is estimated to have been caused by asbestos.
- It is estimated that several thousand deaths annually can be attributed to exposure to asbestos in the home.

Why is asbestos a problem?

- All forms of asbestos, including chrysotile asbestos, are carcinogenic to humans.
- There is no safe threshold level of exposure to any type of asbestos.
- Exposure to asbestos can cause mesothelioma and cancer of the lung, larynx and ovary, asbestosis (fibrosis of the lungs), pleural plaques, thickening and effusions.
- Exposure to asbestos is difficult to control.
- The most effective way to eliminate asbestos-related diseases is to stop the use of all types of asbestos.
- WHO encourages the use of substitutes that are safe for health.

WHO is working to eliminate asbestos-related disease

The World Health Organization, in collaboration with the International Labour Organization and with other intergovernmental organizations and civil society, works with countries towards elimination of

asbestos-related diseases in the following strategic directions:

- By recognizing that the most efficient way to eliminate asbestos-related diseases is to stop the use of all types of asbestos;
- By providing information about solutions for replacing asbestos with safer substitutes and developing economic and technological mechanisms to stimulate its replacement;
- By taking measures to prevent exposure to asbestos in place and during asbestos removal (abatement); and
- By improving early diagnosis, treatment, social and medical rehabilitation of asbestos-related diseases and to establish registries of people with past and/or current exposures to asbestos.

For more information please visit: <http://www.who.int> and search their Fact Sheets on Asbestos.