

Occupations that are Most at Risk for Exposure to Asbestos



Although the Occupational Safety and Health Administration revised their standards for asbestos in the workplace in 1986, many workers still face asbestos exposure hazards.

Workers with the greatest asbestos exposure risks are typically employed in industrial occupations. Although some workers have developed asbestos-related diseases from exposure in hair salons or schools, the greatest risks lie in factories, shipyards, refineries, power plants or other industrial jobsites. Because of this, blue-collar workers must be especially careful to avoid asbestos exposure in the workplace.

Since the Industrial Revolution, production-oriented jobsites have commonly used asbestos parts to insulate their machinery and protect against fires. Asbestos was the preferred insulation for heat-generating equipment or boilers, and much of this insulation still remains in place today.

Asbestos-insulated industrial products are generally not a health threat when they are left alone. A worksite is still considered safe as long as the asbestos products remain “non-friable,” or not easily crushed by hand pressure. However, as asbestos products age and deteriorate, workers must repair or replace them. This process can easily release asbestos into the air.

Because many of these worksites are poorly ventilated, the fibers often circulate in the breathing space once they have been released into the air. This further increases the asbestos exposure risk for industrial occupations.

Construction workers also have a high risk of asbestos exposure. Plumbers, electricians, pipefitters and other workers typically handle asbestos-containing tiles, shingles and pipes as they renovate older buildings. Some of the other asbestos products that contribute to the construction sector’s exposure risks include:

- Adhesives
- Fibreboard
- Wallboard
- Spray-on wall coating

- Insulation
- Paint

Although these products are so prevalent that they generally cannot be avoided, workers can take special steps when handling them to reduce their [occupational exposure risk factors](#).

Avoiding Asbestos Exposure in Today's Work Environment

Decades ago, industrial workers were not told of the health hazards associated with asbestos exposure. More than half of the workers who were occupationally exposed to asbestos between 1940 and 1970 may now be living with an [asbestos-related cancer](#).

Now, however, modern employees understand the importance of adequate asbestos safety training. Most occupations require workers to take special asbestos training classes if their job responsibilities put them in contact with asbestos. HVAC mechanics, construction contractors and electrical engineers are often required to take asbestos training classes; hundreds of other occupations also require this training.

Workers in high-risk occupations must take special precautions around their jobsite. Even if they are trained to handle asbestos, workers should report asbestos-containing materials to their supervisors rather than address the issue on their own. Wet removal methods should always be used, and industrial products that were found to contain asbestos must be removed in accordance with OSHA regulations. Additionally, all of this work must be performed without exceeding OSHA's permissible exposure limits.

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