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Health and Safety

ASBESTOS

What is Asbestos?

Asbestos is a mineral that consists of very fine, needle-shaped fibers. The fibers are so tiny that you cannot see them unless there are thousands in the air. Its fibers are very durable and noncombustible. Its strength, flexibility, and resistance to heat and chemicals make it useful in many building and construction products. When asbestos ages, it disintegrates; when it is disturbed it crumbles. When it can be crumbled, pulverized or reduced to powder by hand pressure, it is called “friable.”

Is it dangerous?

Asbestos is a very dangerous substance. Asbestos becomes a health hazard when its fibers are set free in the air. The small asbestos fibers can cause serious health problems when they are inhaled. When the asbestos fibers are breathed in, they become trapped in the lung tissue where they can cause scarring, asbestosis, and cancer after the initial exposure. Generally, the more prolonged and concentrated the exposure, the more at risk the person becomes later in life. Smoking greatly increases the risk of developing lung cancer from exposure to asbestos. A smoker who is heavily exposed to asbestos is 30 to 90 times more likely to develop lung cancer than a non-smoker.

In asbestos is, the fibers lodge in the lungs, irritating them and causing inflammation. As the inflammation heals, it leaves scar tissue that eventually can stop the air in the lungs from getting in the bloodstream. This can lead to slow suffocation or heart failure.

There are several causes of lung cancer. Asbestos is one of the causes. It takes at least 20 years to develop lung cancer from asbestos.

Sources of Asbestos

Asbestos is used primarily in building construction materials and products. Over 2,000 products in the construction industry contain asbestos.

These products include reinforced asbestos cement sheets and pipes, pipe insulation, roofing felt and shingles, floor tiles, patching and taping compounds, brake lining, clutch facing, insulation paper and protective clothing.

Older office buildings (pre-1978) are likely to have asbestos in the ceiling and floor tiles and in sprayed-on acoustic ceilings and building insulation. Most office buildings built between World War II and the early 1970s were fire-proofed with sprayed-on asbestos materials.

Who is at risk?

CSUEU and CFA members and students may be exposed to asbestos in the buildings where they work.

Chances are that if your building does contain asbestos materials, it has either been removed, encapsulated, or isolated. Asbestos warning signs should be posted in high risk areas. Any activity or contact with these areas should be avoided at all times.

Laws and Regulations

Under the Cal/OSHA law governing asbestos in the worksite, any airborne level which exceeds .1 fibers per cubic centimeter of air is illegal. A cubic centimeter is about the size of a thimble. Remember, asbestos fibers are very small, so you may not be able to see them even if you are exposed above the legal limit. If you ever have any reason to believe that you are potentially being exposed to “friable” asbestos while at work, immediately local contact your local CSUEU job steward or labor relations representative, and Cal/ OSHA.

If you think your rights have been violated, contact your local CSUEU steward