



## BULLETIN FOR ELECTRICAL EMPLOYEES

### Essential asbestos advice for *all* electricians

*Do not look away now* – what you are about to read is as important as it gets for every professional electrician...previous exposure to asbestos kills six electricians *every week* (that's *every week*, not every year). So, do all electricians know how to work safely around this material? Too often, the fatal answer is still “no”.

Recently, the HSE kicked off a major campaign to help protect trade professionals from exposure to asbestos. While the information is aimed directly at employees, it also underlines employers' responsibilities in this crucially important area and provides excellent background to asbestos awareness activity such as 'toolbox talks'.

Both ECA and Unite fully support the HSE campaign - protecting employees from asbestos continues to be a central theme of the ECA's 'ZAP' initiative, which, working with Unite, has significantly raised the profile of health and safety in our industry.

Some locations that commonly contain asbestos materials are:

- ceiling tiles;
- coating on ceilings, walls and stairwells (textured coatings);
- sprayed coating on ducts, pipes and some ceilings;
- boards around radiators, windows, fireplaces, columns and pillars;
- inside fire doors;
- soffit boards;
- pipe insulation;
- sealants on pipe joints, gaskets;
- fuse boxes (e.g. flash pads); and
- electrical switchgear

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If asbestos is not damaged or it is located somewhere where it cannot be easily damaged it doesn't present a significant health risk – it is exposure to the fibres that can kill. Employers should tell employees if there is risk of exposure to asbestos and by law there should be an 'asbestos register' for workplace buildings – employers and employees should ask to see this.

Most electricians will work in the vicinity of asbestos in their career, but there is extra risk when:

- working on an unfamiliar site
- the building pre-dates 2000
- asbestos-containing materials are not identified before the job starts
- asbestos-containing materials are identified but this is not passed on by those in charge to those actually doing the work
- electricians don't know how to recognise asbestos or how to work safely if asbestos is about, or
- they put themselves and others at risk by not taking proper precautions, perhaps to 'save time' or because no one else is requiring or following proper procedures.

#### So, what should electricians do?

- Firstly, don't start work if you haven't been trained to work safely with or close to asbestos or if the asbestos materials you have encountered are sprayed coatings, board or insulation and lagging on pipes and boilers – only licensed contractors should work on these.

- Stop and ask if you are suspicious something may be asbestos or you feel it is beyond your ability to deal with safely. If you need to stop work, seek advice from your employer or if need be, your union representative or the HSE.
- You should only continue to work if you have had training in asbestos-related work, the work has been properly planned and proper precautions are in place (e.g. you have the right protective equipment); and the materials are asbestos cement, textured coatings and certain other materials (see HSE's 'Asbestos essentials' web pages) that do not need an asbestos licence.

More specifically, there is a lot you should do to help protect yourself from harmful exposure to asbestos fibres:

- Follow the plan of work and any task sheets provided (e.g. your employer's or HSE task sheets on its website)
- Use hand tools – not power tools
- Keep materials damp – but not too wet
- Wear a properly fitted and suitable respirator (e.g. disposable FFP3 type) - an ordinary dust mask will not be effective
- Wear suitable disposable overalls (e.g. 'Type 5') and if need be, boots without laces or disposable boot covers
- Clean up as you go – but use a special vacuum cleaner ('class H'), not a brush
- Double-bag any asbestos waste, label the bags and make sure you follow a procedure that sends bags to an appropriate waste site
- Wash before breaks and going home - when you finish work wipe down your overalls with a damp rag and remove them before removing your mask
- Don't take asbestos into your car or home and don't take overalls home (fibres from home washing have even killed family members)
- Don't smoke, eat or drink in the work area (remember, it is illegal to smoke in any workplace, and a huge extra risk if asbestos is about\*).

\* Bear in mind that smoking, even when it's away

from the job, greatly increases the risk of many illnesses, but particularly the lung diseases associated with asbestos exposure.

Asbestos training

**Contractors must, by law, provide a mix of asbestos awareness and job-specific training to employees, sometimes called 'non-licensed asbestos training' covering:**

- asbestos health risks;
- where to find it and what it looks like;
- safe work methods to control exposure;
- how to use and fit a face mask;
- how to deal safely and practically with asbestos waste; and
- how to clean up/decontaminate.

**Employers and employees need to work safely together to ensure that electricians are no longer killed by exposure to asbestos - when it comes to protecting electricians' health at work, preventing exposure to asbestos is top of the list.**

**Sources of useful advice from HSE:**

- \* The 'Hidden Killer' asbestos campaign website at: [www.hse.gov.uk/asbestos/hiddenkiller/handling.htm](http://www.hse.gov.uk/asbestos/hiddenkiller/handling.htm)
- HSE's asbestos web pages: at [www.hse.gov.uk/asbestos/index.htm](http://www.hse.gov.uk/asbestos/index.htm) include free '*Asbestos essentials*' task sheets and leaflets. *Asbestos essentials* provides guidance for maintenance workers on a range of tasks with asbestos that do not need a licence.

## **Did you know that by law, your employer must consult you about relevant health and safety matters?**

It's true! So, expect to be advised and asked for your input on:

- changes that may substantially affect your health and safety. These changes may include:
  - new or different procedures
  - types of work
  - equipment
  - premises
  - ways of working (for example, new shift patterns);
- your company's arrangements for getting competent people to help comply with health and safety law. For example, appointing a health and safety manager or a regular consultant.
- the likely risks in your work and the precautions you should take.

- the best way for health and safety information to be shared (taking into account language, literacy and learning disabilities if need be).
- planning health and safety training, and
- the health and safety consequences of introducing new technology.

'Consultation' means that the employer must keep you advised, and ask for your views, about these issues. They should also give you feedback in due course. If you have a view or suggestion, your employer must consider it. Good employers know it is in their best interests to actively consider all constructive inputs from employees. But, depending on the circumstances, employers are not obliged to act on every suggestion they receive.

You can find a free leaflet about health and safety consultation at:

[www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg232.pdf](http://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/indg232.pdf)

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