

Compliance Headliner

Asbestos; Are you at risk?

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▪ Asbestos, Are you at risk?

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You may be, especially if you work in the automotive industry. Unfortunately, there are still misconceptions today surrounding the existence and the use of asbestos. Many people think that asbestos was banned years ago, but they are only partially correct.

There are two different federal laws under which EPA regulates asbestos; the Clean Air Act (CAA) and the Toxic Substances Control Act (TSCA). In 1989, under the authority of TSCA, the United States Environmental Protection Agency was successful in issuing a final rule known as the "Asbestos Ban and Phase-out Rule". As a result of this ban, many asbestos-containing products were banned from U.S. manufacture, importation, processing, or distribution in commerce. However, in 1991, although certain products did remain banned, much of the original rule was vacated by the U.S. Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals.

Approximately six asbestos-containing product categories remained banned after the rule was vacated. They are: corrugated paper, rollboard, commercial paper, specialty paper, flooring felt and new uses of asbestos. Products no longer subject to the 1989 TSCA ban include: asbestos-cement corrugated sheet, asbestos-cement flat sheet, asbestos clothing, pipeline wrap, roofing felt, vinyl-asbestos floor tile, asbestos-cement shingles, millboard, asbestos-cement pipe, non-roofing coatings and roof coatings. Asbestos-containing product categories no longer subject to the ban that may exist today in the automotive industry are: automatic transmission components, clutch facings, friction materials, disc brake pads, drum brake linings, brake blocks and gaskets.

So, why have asbestos-containing materials been banned and then portions of those bans subsequently overturned? To know the answer to these questions, you have to understand what asbestos is and why it seems to have proven itself so useful and important in our everyday world.

Contradictory to what most people think, asbestos is not a man-made material, but rather a naturally occurring mineral. The term asbestos is a generic term referring usually to six types of naturally occurring mineral fibers. These fibers belong to two mineral groups: serpentines and amphiboles. The following picture depicts an example of asbestos as found in nature.



Serpentine rock with veins of asbestos.

Asbestos; Are you at risk? (continued)

Asbestos is mined for its industrial characteristics. Asbestos fibers exhibit many industrial-conductive qualities such as: incombustibility, thermal stability, resistance to biodegradation, chemical inertia toward most chemicals and low electrical conductivity.

For these qualities, asbestos has proven itself as an extremely viable commodity. It is so valuable in fact, that the ban of many asbestos-containing materials was overturned and those same materials continue to be used today in the production of various consumer commodities found widely in the construction and automotive industries.

In the construction industry, workers can be exposed to asbestos when they disturb asbestos-containing construction materials during renovation or in the process of building demolition. In general industry, employees may be exposed during the manufacture of asbestos-containing products or when performing brake or clutch maintenance in the automotive repair industry.

Asbestos fibers are too small to be seen by the naked eye. Fibers resemble small slivers of glass that can become embedded in the tissue of lungs when inhaled. As a result, the lungs develop scar tissue and this scarring eventually causes a loss of lung function. Once aspirated into the lungs, asbestos can never be dispelled. Symptoms of asbestos exposure can lie dormant for ten, twenty or even up to thirty years.

If you work in either of the aforementioned industries, you can find information pertaining to applicable regulatory requirements and protective measures associated with asbestos by visiting www.epa.gov and searching for keyword "asbestos". If you work exclusively in the automotive industry, as a helpful resource, we have included herein this newsletter, an informative tri-fold. This pocket guide contains a plethora of useful information, from EPA approved methods for brake and clutch cleaning, to the do's and don'ts of working with asbestos or materials suspected to contain asbestos.

In summation, it is important to remember that asbestos does still exist today in consumer products and asbestos can be a danger to your health if not properly handled. The best defense is knowledge. This advice can prove useful not only at work but at home as well. Protect yourself, your health and your family by learning how to work with asbestos safely. Your health depends upon it.

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