Everything Asbestos- CWU guide

Everything you need to know about asbestos- What is it?

Asbestos is a heat-resistant fibrous mineral that naturally occurs in the ground. For nearly 150 years, it was widely used to create fireproofing, insulating, and soundproofing products.

Six different minerals can be described as 'asbestos' and are all known carcinogens, though the three main types used in Britain were chrysotile, amosite, and crocidolite. Their prolific use in the construction, textile, automotive, and shipbuilding industries means that, even though asbestos was officially banned in 1999, the danger to British citizens' health is ongoing.

Chrysotile (white asbestos)

*1 - **Chrysotile (white asbestos)***

Chrysotile, or white asbestos, was the most common type of asbestos manufactured around the world. Despite being the last type of asbestos to be banned in the UK in 1999, it can still be found in large quantities today.

Where was chrysotile asbestos used?

Over the decades, chrysotile was used in many hundreds of household items, and found its way into most residences and industrial buildings.

Since its fibres are fine and soft in nature, it was often woven and spun into asbestos textiles like fireproof blankets, safety clothing, and even theatre curtains.

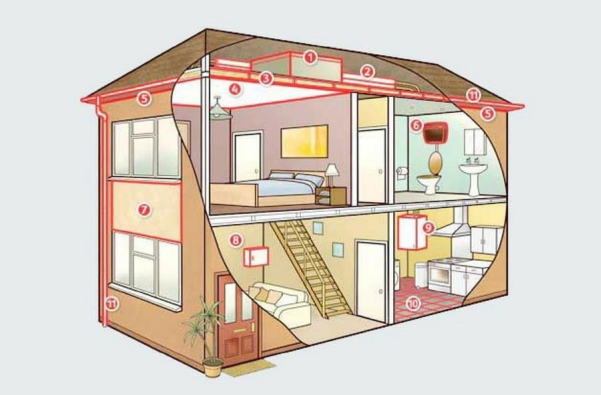
The substance was used for acoustic and fireproofing purposes, especially for flooring and wallboards in densely-populated areas and industrial centres alike. Chrysotile was also used by the automotive industry to make brake linings, clutches, brake pads and gaskets

Where can you find chrysotile asbestos in the UK today?

Today, chrysotile is suspected to be contained in 50% of private and residential buildings throughout the United Kingdom. The widespread use of chrysotile in building and household materials means that significant amounts of this type of asbestos remain today. Among other products, the most common locations to uncover asbestos are:

- Water tanks
- Asbestos cement
- Asbestos insulation boarding
- Ceiling and floor tiles
- Partition walling
- Pipes
- Gaskets
- Fire blankets

- Gutters and downpipes
- Soffits
- Roofing sheets
- Roofing shingles



What is the difference between serpentine and amphiboles asbestos?

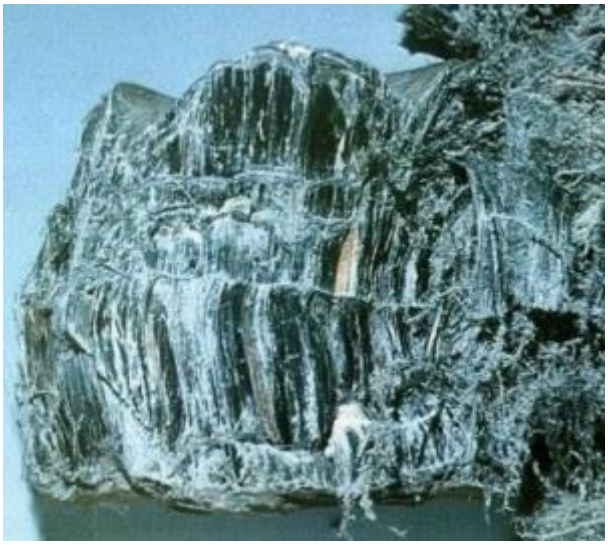
Chrysotile belongs to the serpentine family, and its fibres are softer and curvier than their cousins in the amphibole group. Their flexibility made it extremely easy to develop a myriad of products like fabrics, insulation, and much more. It is said that, if inhaled, chrysotile fibres are more readily expelled by the body than amphiboles, with a needle-like composition.

Amphiboles fibres can easily penetrate lung walls when breathed in, and offer a serious risk to health when airborne.

No matter the variety, however, all asbestos dust and fibres pose a serious health risk, and are the cause of many illnesses including pleural mesothelioma and asbestosis.

Crocidolite (blue asbestos)

Also known as blue asbestos, crocidolite is a fibrous form of the mineral Riebeckite. Mined in South Africa, Australia, and Bolivia until the 1960s, it is widely believed to present the highest risk factor for any form of asbestos due to its high ‘friability’ rate. This means that fibres break up easily when disturbed.



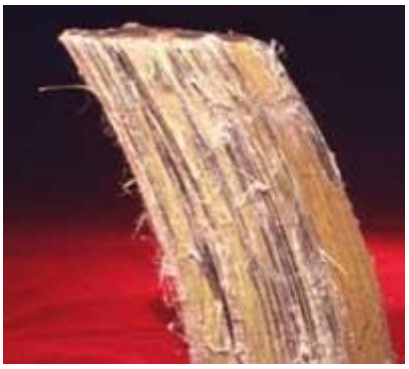
2 - crocidolite- Blue Asbestos

Blue asbestos was renowned for its fire-retardant and insulating properties, and – with the strength of its fibres – became a widely-used resource across many industries. Construction, automotive shipbuilding, and even the tobacco industry used the substance on a regular basis (Lorillard Tobacco patented its crocidolite-containing Micronite filter promoting it as a healthy alternative to standard cigarette filters of the day!).

Banned in the UK in 1985, crocidolite's particularly strong needle-like fibres lodge in the lung linings when inhaled.

Amosite (brown asbestos)

'Amosite', or brown asbestos, is actually an acronym and trade name for grunerite, a member of the amphibole group of minerals. It was largely mined in the Transvaal Province in South Africa, which is where the name originated – Asbestos Mines of South Africa (AMOSA).



3 - Amosite - brown asbestos

Amosite offers great resistance to heat and has strong insulating properties. For these reasons, it was a common addition to construction materials in many countries around the

world. Its long, brittle fibres are easily broken, however, and readily inhaled. It is regarded as the second most dangerous type of asbestos, and was banned in the UK in 1986.

Where is amosite found today?

This dangerous substance still remains in many of our older buildings, posing a danger to workers and members of the public undertaking DIY, refurbishment, renovation, and demolition work.

Building products requiring high-tensile strength were often manufactured using amosite. These included:

- Roofing tiles
- Ceiling and floor tiles
- Cement sheets
- Electrical insulation
- Pipe lagging
- Chemical insulation
- Asbestos insulating board

Because of their excellent fire resistance, ceiling tiles containing amosite were commonly used in educational buildings, and have been the subject of debate for many years.

Other forms of asbestos

Though these three forms of asbestos may have been used less prolifically than chrysotile, crocidolite, and amosite, they still pose a significant danger to health if their asbestos dust or fibres inhaled.

Tremolite

Tremolite was commonly a part of other minerals including vermiculite, talc, and chrysotile asbestos. Tremolite can occur in shades of green, grey, white, and brown.

Mined in only a few places globally (and in small amounts), products containing the substance are not often seen in this country. However, it is thought to be as dangerous as other forms of asbestos if handled incorrectly.

It may be found in:

- Asbestos insulating board (AIB)
- Asbestos cement sheeting and pipes
- Casings for telecoms and electrical wiring

- Thermal insulation, such as lagging
- Fire doors
- Gaskets
- Vermiculite products such as loft insulation, whitewashes and packaging materials
- Talc products, including ceramics and chalks
- Paint and sealant

Anthophyllite

Anthophyllite is a magnesium and iron silicate that is fibrous in nature, and also extremely brittle. It is generally brown in colour, but may include shades of green, grey, and yellow. Unlike crocidolite and amosite, anthophyllite fibres have low tensile strength did not have a high value in the asbestos industry.

Anthophyllite is naturally found in various areas of America, Asia, and Northern Europe – Finland in particular.

It can be found in the vermiculite products and, historically, in cosmetic talcum powders. Due to its insulating and fireproofing properties, anthophyllite asbestos may also be found in:

- Asbestos cement
- Composite flooring
- Insulation
- Roofing material
- Paints and sealants

Actinolite

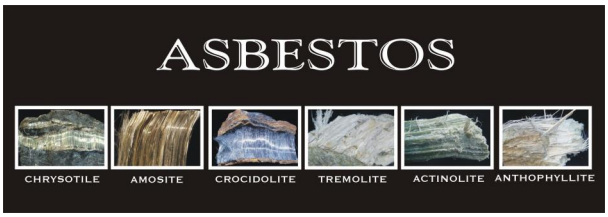
Actinolite is similar in nature to tremolite, but far less commonly used. It was mined in several areas around the world, including Australia and the United States (North Carolina).

This substance was often included in insulation and fireproofing materials, along with other minerals, and is generally brown, grey, or green in colour. Older residential and commercial buildings may still contain products manufactured with actinolite, as it provided a lightweight insulating solution in the building trade.

Its other uses also included:

- Concrete materials
- Sealants and paints

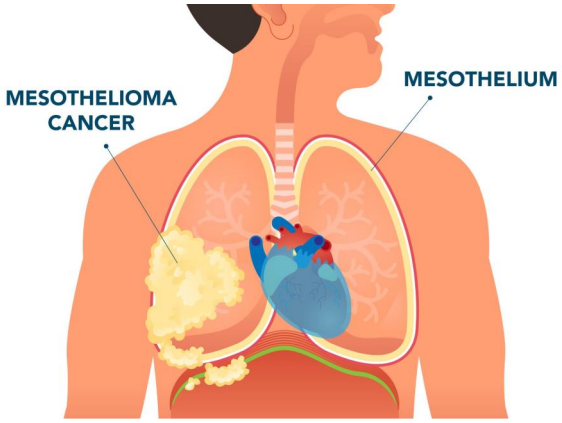
- Horticultural vermiculite

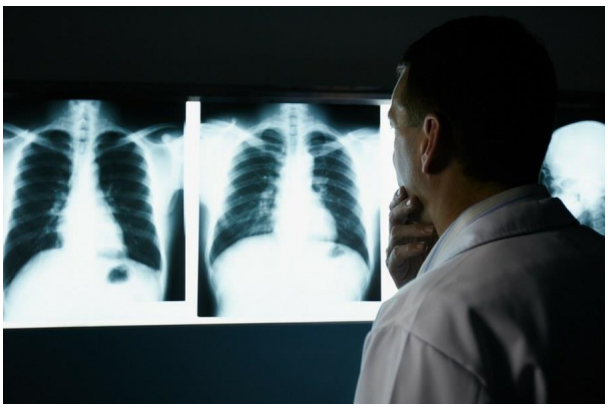


THE LATENCY PERIOD

If inhaled or ingested by the body, all forms of asbestos have the potential to cause life-threatening disease. The long latency period of asbestos disease means that people may not be aware they have an asbestos-related illness for several decades – sometimes **up to 60 years from the initial exposure**. Shockingly, up to 5,000 citizens die each year from exposure to asbestos.

Mesothelioma and other asbestos-related diseases





Mesothelioma

When asbestos dust and fibres are breathed in, they settle within the lining of the lungs, setting up the environment within the body that causes this untreatable type of cancer.

Mesothelioma begins to aggressively attacks the outer lining of the lungs, and after diagnosis, life expectancy is typically no longer than 18 months.

Although there are three types of the disease, the most common form is pleural mesothelioma.

Asbestosis

Asbestosis is a long-term illness that results in severe breathing problems due to scarring on the lungs. Although non-malignant and varying in severity, it is thought that asbestosis is often a precursor to mesothelioma.

Asbestos-related lung cancer

It can be difficult to attribute lung cancer purely to asbestos exposure, as the disease manifests in the same way as other types of lung cancer (such as that caused by smoking). Asbestos-related lung cancer generally begins between 20 and 30 years following exposure to the substance, but can progress considerably quicker if the sufferer is also a smoker.

Does asbestos always pose a danger?

If left undisturbed, asbestos is not considered a specific danger to health. It is only when attempts are made to remove it – or when its fibres and dust are released into the air – that it becomes a health hazard.

Many people are unaware of the risks posed by asbestos – it is commonly thought that it was a historical problem, rather than a current one.

Over 40,000 people have died from mesothelioma since 2004.

Who is at risk from asbestos exposure?

Anyone whose work could bring them into contact with asbestos is potentially at risk.

Private individuals renovating their own properties may also be at risk, but due to the increased likelihood of tradespeople coming into contact with asbestos, they are the group most often exposed to these harmful substances. These include tradespeople such as plumbers, heating engineers, and electricians, but also surveyors, architects, and engineers.

Taking a wider viewpoint, it is possible that anyone working within commercial or public buildings such as schools and hospitals, could also be unwittingly exposed to asbestos dust and fibres. The prevalence of asbestos-containing materials (ACMs) within the construction industry – even in sites' rubble and soil – extends the threat further.

So where might asbestos be found within these buildings?

How to stay safe if you encounter asbestos

The Health and Safety Executive has issued specific guidelines regarding the handling of asbestos. If any company is found not to have followed these requirements, they face prosecution, unlimited fines, and potential prison sentences for the individuals involved.

Anyone untrained in the safe removal of asbestos is not only risking their own health, but also the safety of those around them should it be disturbed. If workers unexpectedly encounter a substance they suspect to be asbestos, they must leave it undisturbed. When in doubt, always make the assumption that it is, in fact, asbestos.

A risk assessment should then be carried out. If necessary, licensed contractors may be called in to deal with higher-risk ACMs such as sprayed coatings, insulation, and lagging. If a licensed contractor is not required, only those specifically trained in non-licensable work should carry out the removal process.

Whose duty is it to manage asbestos?

The Control of Asbestos Regulations 2012 (CAR12) state that the duty to manage asbestos lies with the owners or occupiers of commercial buildings who are in charge of maintenance and repair. Landlords also have a duty to manage asbestos in 'common' areas such as lifts, staircases, boiler rooms, store rooms, and outbuildings.

An asbestos survey should be carried out to identify where asbestos is located within the building. A risk register can then be used to record its presence, condition, and whereabouts, being updated regularly to provide a current view of the exposure risk.

Complete asbestos awareness training for compliance and safety

Every British employer must provide asbestos education to all employees who may come into contact with ACMs. Asbestos awareness training covers all six forms of asbestos, so you'll learn where they might be found, what they look like, and what the proper protocol for handling a situation is. **ASBESTOS HIDES IN MANY PLACES...**

A. asbestos rope seals, gaskets and paper

B. toilet cistern

C. textured decorating coatings on walls and ceilings, for example Artex

D. asbestos insulating board (AIB) panels in fire doors

E. AIB partition walls

F. asbestos cement water tank

G. asbestos flash guards in a fuse box

H. vinyl floor tiles backed with asbestos paper and bitumen adhesive

I. lagging on boilers and pipes

J. loose fill insulation

K. AIB ceiling tiles

L. sprayed coatings on ceilings, walls, beams and columns

M. AIB around boilers

Outside

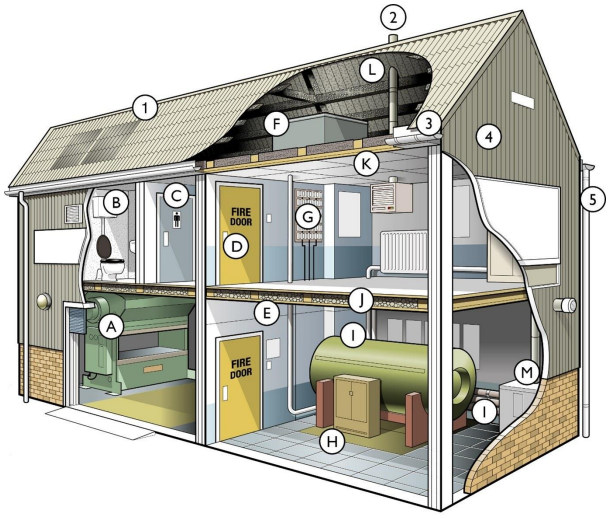
1. profiled asbestos cement roof

2. asbestos cement pipe

3. AIB or asbestos cement soffits and fascias

4. asbestos cement panels

5. asbestos cement gutters and downpipes



*4 - **ASBESTOS HIDES IN MANY PLACES...***

INFORMING OTHERS

1. When to Inform your GP & Occupational Health

- **Tell your GP** about potential occupational asbestos exposure—this will become part of your medical record and may trigger long-term monitoring or chest X-rays with the NHS "pulmonary asbestos surveillance" guidance.
- If your workplace has an occupational health service, **inform them in writing**. Ask them to file your exposure information in your occupational health record.

Keep copies of any correspondence, medical reports, and workplace assessments to support future claims or monitoring.

2. Register the Building on UK's National Asbestos Register (UKNAR)

If your former workplace still contains asbestos and you want to ensure responsibility is tracked:

- **Search or add the property** on the UK National Asbestos Register (UKNAR):

    - Search existing entries or register your property: UKNAR – National Asbestos Register Search [search.asb...ssmart.net], [uknar.org]

- This ensures **formal traceability**: anyone working there can access asbestos details and it records duty-holder responsibility to manage exposure.

UKNAR is a free, secure database endorsed by public bodies and Mesothelioma UK. [britsafe.org], [mesothelioma.uk.com]

3. Document your personal work history

Create a timeline of your employment, tasks, and potential asbestos contact.

Request copies of any asbestos surveys, risk assessments, or safety instructions.

Log any exposure-related symptoms, with dates and medical visits.

Keep an organised folder—digital or physical.

📜 **Why This Matters**

- Your **GP/health record** captures clinical history and potential asbestos-related surveillance.
- **UKNAR registration** flags the site for asbestos content and ensures compliance by duty-holders.
- **Personal documentation** preserves the timeline and evidence you might need later if you decide to file a claim.

Retrospective Asbestos or dust exposure recording… **Tell your union the CWU.**

Why this is important…

Employers are required by the **Control of Substances Hazardous to Health** (COSHH) Regulations to implement effective and reliable control measures that reduce dust exposure. Where this does not happen and any CWU member is exposed to potentially harmful dust and fibers, **we must aim to continue to record all such events centrally at CWU HQ.**

Please note however, since 2025 there has been a significant difference in comparison with how this was previously done, it will now be done via electronic recording.

This can be done quickly and easily via the link or QR code shown below.

https://forms.office.com/Pages/ResponsePage.aspx?id=4wtMzEaQXUaFsB5xb7WiosqwUHQ5RwlBqQ-nevdCPPlUNUQ3V1hJQVJNNDZBV0VUSEdFQTFZUjNLVC4u

For every colleague who completes this form, upon submission this will generate **a unique log number** which will be made available to the individual submitting the report and also to any CWU chosen branch officer to enable CWU branch records to be also updated alongside CWU central services records.

*5 - **AVSG support options***

AVSG Support

In the 1960s and 70s, at the height of asbestos use in the UK, only a very few campaigners were prepared to confront the powerful asbestos industry. In the1990s, as the true scale of human suffering from asbestos-related disease emerged **Asbestos Victims' Support Groups** (AVSGs) started to be set up.

Experienced campaigners with a background in trade unions, were joined by those who had lost a loved one to asbestos. These groups began to meet informally to share information and best practice, and then to campaign nationally for justice for all asbestos victims, as the numbers of deaths continued to rise. In 2005, several asbestos victims' support groups established the Asbestos Victims Support Groups' (AVSG) Forum UK.

News - Asbestos Victims Support Group Forum - UK

UK Context: Still …The Worst in the World

• Asbestos disease is the leading cause of workplace deaths in the UK, with the highest global incidence of mesothelioma.

• Over 5,000 people die annually from asbestos-related diseases, including mesothelioma, lung cancer, asbestosis, and pleural thickening—compared to 1,500 road traffic deaths.

• With no significant government funding for medical research, life expectancy after symptom onset averages just 1–2 years. According to medics, Mesothelioma causes intolerable pain as fluid builds and causes breathlessness

• The HSE estimates annual costs at £3.4 billion for mesothelioma deaths and £3.1 billion for asbestos-related lung cancer.

• Asbestos remains in 80% of schools and 94% of hospital trusts in England. Diseases from asbestos exposure in former school and hospital workers costs the UK economy £1.3 billion per year.

CWU member support

Sadly, **many CWU members** have been supported by regional Asbestos Victims support Groups. Asbestos contained material (ACM) was widely used in Royal Mail buildings and BT/Openreach telephone exchanges, particularly as fire stopping material and on cable runways. There is a still a huge ACM legacy around both estates

There is also an Asbestos Victims Support Group Forum UK.

The Forum is governed by a board of six trustees: Neil Bishop (Central England), David Ellis (London), John Flanagan (Merseyside), Rachel Gallagher (Clydebank), Jerry Hague (East midlands), and Nevyn Stevenson (Yorkshire and Humber).

Forum members fall into two categories:

Advice Group Members

who provide comprehensive advice on benefits, compensation, and other support

• Asbestos Action

Asbestos Action – Helping Asbestos Sufferers across Scotland

• Asbestos Support Central England

About Us – Asbestos Support Central England

• Cheshire Asbestos Victims Support Group

www.cavsg.co.uk

• Clydebank Asbestos Group

Clydebank Asbestos Group – Helping Victims of Asbestos Related Disease

• East Midlands Asbestos Support Team

East Midlands Asbestos Support Team - EMAST - UKATA

• Greater Manchester Asbestos Victims Support Group

Home - Greater Manchester Asbestos Support Group

• HASAG Asbestos Disease Support

About - HASAG

• London Asbestos Support Awareness Group

Mesothelioma | London Asbestos Support Awareness Group

• Merseyside Asbestos Victims Support Group (mavsg.org)

Home : Merseyside Asbestos Victim Support Group

• Yorkshire & Humberside Asbestos Victims Support

Benefits Advice Service - SARAG - Yorkshire and Humberside Asbestos Support Group

Network Group Members

who offer various types of support, but not all provide full benefits and compensation advice

• Asbestos Awareness and Support Cymru

Support - A.A.S.C

• Cumbria & Lancashire Asbestos Support & Advice Group (disabilityfirst.org)

Cumbria & Lancashire Asbestos Support Advice Group

• Northern TUC Asbestos Support & Campaign Group

Northern TUC Asbestos Support and Campaign Group

• READLEY Asbestos & Mesothelioma Support Group

About — Readley

• Southwest Asbestos Support Awareness Group

About - SWASAG

Anyone diagnosed with an asbestos related disease may be entitled to industrial injuries benefits from the government regardless of your income, savings or if you receive a State Pension. Depending on your circumstances these benefits can be quite substantial. AVSG members have a wealth of experience in helping people apply for these benefits.

AVSGs CAN USUALLY HELP TO OBTAIN THE FOLLOWING BENEFITS.

Please note*

These figures were accurate as of April 2025

INDUSTRIAL INJURIES DISABLEMENT BENEFIT: £225.30/WEEK

PWC1 (79 ACT) The Pneumoconiosis etc. Workers' Compensation Act 1979

PAYMENT: THIS IS A ONE-OFF PAYMENT BASED ON AGE, FROM £111,640 FOR AGED 37 AND UNDER TO £14,949 FOR AGED 77 AND OVER

CAA (Constant Attendance Allowance) & ESA (Employment & support Allowance) RANGE FROM £90.20 – £180.40 per week.

FOR AN AVERAGE 75YEAR OLD WITH MESOTHELIOMA ON IIDB (Industrial Illness Disablements Benefit) & INTERMEDIATE RATE OF CAA & ESA

THIS WOULD MEAN A WEEKLY INCOME OF £450.80 AND A LUMP SUM PAYMENT OF £19,279

The CWU are working in partnership with other organisations for a real Government commitment to an Asbestos-Free UK by 2065;

We believe that an independent UK task force could drive forward this commitment and enhance public knowledge on the real and present problem of asbestos in the UK.

Further reading is below from organisations who would likely be part of this task force, **The CWU have registered an interest in becoming part of an independent UK task force.**

Research | Airtight on Asbestos | United Kingdom

Don't Breathe In: Bridging the Asbestos Safety Gap - ResPublica

Asbestos Information

Mesothelioma UK | Supporting people with this asbestos cancer