

Asbestos safety starts with proper training

The legal requirements for safely handling asbestos-containing materials.

Construction projects stopped using asbestos in 1990, and Canada officially banned the material in 2018. But many older structures still have asbestos-containing materials (ACM). The ongoing presence of ACM means that workers and other building occupants remain at risk of asbestos exposure.

Asbestos, a naturally occurring mineral fibre, is one of the biggest health risks found in older buildings, including residential homes, schools, hospitals, airports, and industrial facilities. Asbestos is known for its strength, ability to withstand high temperatures, and chemical resistance. For much of the twentieth century, it was added to insulation, flooring, roofing, and other consumer products. However, this changed when the dangers of exposure became clear.

A person exposed to asbestos may not notice any immediate symptoms. In fact, the time between inhaling asbestos fibres and the onset of disease, known as the “latency period,” can range from 15 to 55 years. Asbestos exposure can lead to serious illnesses over time, such as asbestosis (i.e., scarring of the lungs that makes breathing difficult), lung cancer, and mesothelioma (i.e., a cancer that affects the lining of the chest and abdomen).

Handling asbestos-containing materials

When someone improperly handles ACM, it can release harmful fibres into the air. These fibres put workers and other building occupants at risk. Proper training in asbestos abatement—the process of controlling asbestos fibres in the ACM through removal or containment to prevent exposure—is essential to keeping people safe.

According to the *Occupational Health and Safety Act* (OHSA) and Section 19 of the *Regulation for Designated Substance - Asbestos on Construction Projects and in Buildings and Repair Operations* (O. Reg. 278/05), employers are responsible for making sure that workers receive the appropriate training. The type of training that workers need depends on the type of asbestos-related work they perform. This obligation ensures that workers have the knowledge and skills they need to correctly handle hazards and protect themselves and others on the job.

Understanding competency

Workers must receive asbestos abatement training from a competent person who delivers all the necessary information and techniques needed to work safely and effectively. The OHSA defines a “competent person” as someone with the knowledge, training, and experience to organize and perform the work safely, understand the relevant legislation, and recognize workplace hazards.

Training should cover key topics, such as the hazards of asbestos exposure, proper personal hygiene, and the rules of safely handling asbestos.

“Competence is absolutely key,” says Michele Beckstead-Jackson, Construction Specialist at the Ministry of Labour, Immigration, Training, and Skills Development (MLITSD). “If the person providing training has no practical experience in abatement work and isn’t competent themselves in the measures and procedures that workers must follow, they can’t possibly ensure that a worker is given all the proper information and techniques that they need to know in order to work smartly and safely.”

Types of asbestos removal operations

Under Ontario law, there are three types of asbestos removal operations:

- **Type 1 (low risk):** If proper procedures are followed, it’s unlikely that exposure will exceed acceptable limits.
- **Type 2 (medium risk):** These operations are likely to create exposure that exceeds acceptable limits.
- **Type 3 (high risk):** These operations involve frequent or prolonged exposure to ACM and can release substantial amounts of asbestos dust. They pose serious risks to workers and others nearby.

It’s important to understand the risk and exposure levels of each operation, as well as the specific training requirements that workers and supervisors must meet before handling asbestos safely.



Choosing the right training

There are two levels of asbestos training: general awareness training and specialized training. General awareness training teaches workers who may be exposed to asbestos how to identify the potential risks of coming into contact with or disturbing ACM. They also learn to understand the limitations of working around ACM. This training is completed by workers in the skilled trades, including electricians, plumbers, pipefitters, gas fitters, painters, drywallers, demolition workers, and heating and ventilation specialists.

Section 20(1) of the *Regulation for Designated Substance - Asbestos on Construction Projects and in Buildings and Repair Operations* (O. Reg. 278/05) requires specialized training for Type 3 asbestos abatement operations: 253W (Asbestos Abatement Worker) and 253S (Asbestos Abatement Supervisor). After they successfully complete the training, workers and supervisors can proceed to take the MLITSD's asbestos abatement test for their designated class: 253W for workers and 253S for supervisors. Supervisors must first complete 253W and get certified at the worker level before taking 253S training.

Following the Ministry's required steps to certification

Employers must follow a structured process to help workers receive the right training and their asbestos abatement certificate card:

1. Employers must apply through the MLITSD to become a signing authority by submitting a signing authority application form.
2. Once approved by the MLITSD's local apprenticeship office, the signing authority (i.e., the employer) must register employees in a Ministry-approved asbestos abatement program with a training provider. They must also submit the required paperwork to the local Ministry office before training begins.
3. The worker must register with a college testing centre to take the required exam after they complete training. The employer may also register for the worker.
4. After the worker completes the test and submits the employer-signed documents to the local apprenticeship branch, the branch will issue a completion certificate card to the worker.

If an MLITSD inspector arrives at a jobsite where workers perform asbestos abatement before the apprenticeship branch issues a worker's official completion card, the worker can present the acknowledgement certificate from the training provider as a temporary measure. However, the inspector has the option to decide whether they will accept this certificate in place of the Ministry-issued card.

A worker who completes an asbestos training program without their employer registering them with the Ministry cannot receive an official completion card. In this case, the Ministry would not have a record of the worker's registration, which is why it's important to complete all steps in the right order to ensure proper certification.

Learning more about hazardous materials

Workers may also choose to go beyond standard asbestos abatement training by taking the 253H (Hazardous Materials Worker) apprenticeship program. This program provides foundational training for safely managing different workplace hazardous materials, including asbestos.

"253H has a more generic focus," says Beckstead-Jackson of the MLITSD. "It was created to ensure apprentices specifically receive overall basic training to equip workers to deal with a variety of hazardous materials in the workplace. Asbestos is one of those that they cover."

This program is generally delivered by unions, and participants are not required to complete a standardized test. It's up to the trainer to administer a test or quiz after the sessions. Workers receive a certificate of completion as acknowledgement that they finished the course.



While 253H offers valuable training, it's not a substitute for specialized asbestos abatement training. The 253H program and 253W and 253S programs are tracked under different systems. The law doesn't recognize 253H as equivalent to 253W and 253S. In fact, workers must complete 253W before enrolling in 253H because it's a prerequisite for the program.

Proper asbestos abatement training is essential for keeping workers and building occupants safe from exposure to ACM. Ministry-approved training and certification give workers the skills and confidence to handle ACM safely and reduce risks of exposure. By following the guidelines for training certification, employers can guarantee that every worker who handles ACM is certified—protecting lives and complying with provincial safety standards. ■



More on asbestos safety



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