

Learning more about asbestos

What is asbestos?

Asbestos is a naturally occurring rock fibre that can be harmful to humans. Consequently, asbestos is now banned from most modern products, but remains a serious legacy issue in the Pacific from its past widespread use in building materials, insulation, brake linings, roofing products, electrical and other consumer products. When products containing asbestos are damaged or wear down over time, small asbestos fibres are released and become airborne where they can be readily inhaled. Although these fibres are not immediately toxic, they can remain lodged in the lungs and can eventually cause serious lung disease including asbestosis, lung and other cancers many years after inhalation.



Asbestos training: practical work on the decontamination process. Photo: SPREP

Did you know?

- The most common types of asbestos are chrysotile (white asbestos), crocidolite (blue asbestos) and amosite (brown asbestos).
- Asbestos-containing materials (ACM), such as cement water pipes, corrugated roof sheets, floor tiles, wall claddings and insulation such as boiler insulation, were widely used in the construction sector in the Pacific prior to being phased-out due to health concerns.
- Exposure to asbestos fibres causes human cancer of the lung, larynx and ovaries, and other diseases such as mesothelioma, asbestosis and plaques (WHO 2014b).
- Pacific islanders may unknowingly become exposed to asbestos fibres when working with ACM such as during roof or boiler repairs, or during the aftermath of a natural disaster involving disturbance and dispersal of ACM.

Asbestos in the Pacific

- Based on a regional assessment of 13 Pacific island countries completed in 2013 and 2014 as part of the EU-funded PacWaste Project, over 285,784 square metres and 267 cubic metres of ACM was estimated to be distributed across the Pacific in stockpiles, abandoned infrastructure and occupied buildings.
- 87 percent of this was considered high risk with significant potential for release of asbestos fibres if disturbed potentially posing significant health risk to occupants of affected buildings.
- The results from the Regional Asbestos Baseline Survey concluded that over USD 150 million would be needed to remove and replace all the asbestos identified in the locations surveyed.
- In 2017 the SPREP Council Meeting endorsed initiatives by countries to ban or restrict the importation, re-use and re-sale of products and wastes containing asbestos with the exception of exportation and importation for the purpose of safe disposal.

What you can do ...

- If you are building, ensure that all your building supplies are asbestos free, not all Pacific islands have legally banned the importation of asbestos, so make sure you check before you buy.
- When handling the dismantling of asbestos, make sure you seek proper technical advice and wear appropriate protective gear. Please contact your national authority first and ensure you abide by the required guidelines to keep you, and those in the area safe.
- If you believe that asbestos is being sold, or work is done on asbestos in your vicinity and the proper precautions are not being taken, please contact your national authorities. While it may not be legal to sell or import asbestos in your country, a register can be taken of where asbestos may be across your island.

Let's all work together to manage our Pacific asbestos waste. Have that Pacific Conversation today.