



Health & Safety **MATTERS**

Health & Safety Information for GMB Safety Reps

HSE ASBESTOS CAMPAIGN - "THE HIDDEN KILLER".

If you've been anywhere near a radio this winter, you will have probably heard the recent adverts for HSE's "Asbestos: The Hidden Killer" campaign. The objective of the campaign is to make tradesmen aware that asbestos is relevant to them and can affect their health and their lives. GMB have worked with the HSE to develop the campaign, and this edition will cover why the issue is so important and what is being done.

What is the issue?

Many tradesmen know that asbestos is dangerous, but they do not believe they are personally at risk. They feel that because they don't work directly with asbestos, either in manufacturing it or working in industries with known histories of exposure, asbestos is not relevant to their line of work. Common misconceptions are:

- It's the other maintenance trades that should be cautious, and
- Since the ban of asbestos 'many years ago', they believe the problem has been dealt with.

Many workers do not regard asbestos as a problem because they do not acknowledge the immediate danger. Many tradesmen, particularly younger workers, would not even recognise asbestos.

Workers need to be aware that the issue of asbestos has not been consigned to history. Risks with asbestos still exist, particularly for joiners, plumbers, electricians and anyone else who might disturb asbestos in the course of their work.

What's the extent of the problem?

Any building built or refurbished before 2000 could contain asbestos. This means that there are still over half a million non-domestic buildings in Britain which contain asbestos. This asbestos presence does not pose a risk, providing it is covered and left undisturbed.

Unfortunately, a number of trades involve disturbing asbestos, by cutting, drilling or hammering into it. This means that, whilst the number of deaths from workers in 'traditional' industries such as shipbuilding, asbestos product manufacturing, metal plate workers etc. have reached a level, the numbers of deaths in trades such as plumbers, heating & ventilation engineers, joiners & electricians continue to rise.

The statistics make for shocking reading:

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Making Your Workplace Safer

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- There were 4,000 deaths last year caused by asbestos exposure; 1,000 of those were tradesmen.
 - 20 tradesmen die each week from asbestos exposure. Of these:
 - 6 are electricians
 - 3 are plumbers
 - 6 are joiners

Work with asbestos should only commence if:

- Workers have been trained to safely work with asbestos;
- The work is properly planned;
- The right control measures and equipment are in place;
- The materials are asbestos cement, textured coatings which contain asbestos or other materials which do not require a licensed contractor.

Workers should not perform any work if they are unsure whether asbestos is present, they have not been trained to work safely with asbestos, or if the asbestos is present on sprayed coatings, board or lagging on boilers and pipes. Only a licensed contractor should work on these.

Has the campaign worked?

The HSE campaign has received very positive feedback. An article highlighting the danger of asbestos for tradesmen was published in the most recent edition of the GMB Magazine, which was sent to over 600,000 GMB members. In addition, Regional Health and Safety Officers have distributed more than 3000 campaign packs, containing information leaflets and guidance specifically designed for workers.

More widely, there is real evidence that the campaign has had an impact. There was a ten-fold increase in the number of calls to HSE's Infoline during the campaign when compared to the same period last October. Earlier indications were that a number of organisations had experienced an increase in web-hits related to the campaign. HSE's asbestos website had 53,000 unique visitors accessing the site, a three-fold increase from this time last year. In addition, increased sales of face masks were reported by leading retailers. The formal evaluation is due to report in late January, and GMB will be involved in determining what the next steps are.

The HSE campaign has served to highlight the risk to tradesmen, but the dangers are very real and are not going to disappear overnight. For more information on the campaign, or to find out what you can do to make yourself and your colleagues more aware and safer, contact tristan.chard@gmb.org.uk

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