



Three Common Misconceptions About Asbestos

By Therese Searles, Project Manager at Envirologic

It is a well-known fact that asbestos is a carcinogen. If we were on an episode of Family Feud and the question was “Name a substance that causes cancer,” asbestos would certainly be one of the top three answers. In fact, asbestos was one of the first hazardous substances subject to federal regulations; in 1970, it was identified as a hazardous air pollutant under Section 112 of the Clean Air Act and became regulated by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Around the same time, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) established the first federal guidelines for workplace safety related to asbestos exposure. Only a few years later, asbestos was listed as a human carcinogen by the American Conference of Governmental Industrial Hygienists.

Surely now, over 50 years after asbestos was first federally regulated, the public has become well versed in all things asbestos related, right? Actually, no. Working in the environmental consulting industry, Envirologic has found that several misconceptions remain when it comes to asbestos regulations and industry requirements. We have narrowed down the top three most common asbestos-related misconceptions, and each is discussed in detail below.

Misconception #1: All asbestos has been banned.

This misconception most likely exists due to the EPA’s 1989 rule, under the Toxic Substances Control Act, commonly known as the “[Asbestos Ban and Phase-Out Rule](#).” This rule was initially set up to impose a full ban on the manufacture, importation, processing, and sale of asbestos-containing products. However, much of the original rule was overturned and remanded by the U.S. Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals in 1991.

One element of the Asbestos Ban and Phase-Out Rule that remains today is the ban of any new uses for asbestos. In 2019, the EPA issued a final rule to ensure that discontinued asbestos products could not be reintroduced into the commercial market without the EPA’s evaluation for any necessary restrictions.

Only five other asbestos products are still banned: corrugated paper, rollboard, commercial paper, specialty paper, and flooring felt. Notice that the use of asbestos in some of the most common asbestos-containing products -- including vinyl asbestos floor tile, gaskets, aftermarket brake pads, and roof coatings -- is not currently banned.

In summary, asbestos can still exist in commonly used building materials today. The only way to know for sure if a product or building material contains asbestos is by analytical testing. This leads us to the importance of Misconception #2.



Misconception #2: Buildings built after 1980 don't need an asbestos survey.

The [OSHA Asbestos Standard for General Industry 29 CFR 1910.1001\(i\)\(3\)\(i\)](#) requires that building owners determine the presence, location, and quantity of asbestos-containing materials (ACMs) and presumed asbestos-containing materials (PACMs) and exercise due diligence to comply with this requirement. Owner-occupied residences are excluded.

The confusion surrounding whether buildings built after 1980 need asbestos surveys may stem from the fact that certain materials may be presumed to be asbestos containing (i.e., PACMs) if they were installed before 1981. According to 1910.1001 (b), PACMs include thermal systems installation (TSI) and surfacing material (SM). This standard was initially established to allow for certain materials (TSI and SM) that were likely to contain asbestos to be treated as ACM without requiring laboratory analysis. In no way does the standard negate an owner's due diligence requirements for a survey. For example, even if TSI or SM was installed after 1980 and therefore not a PACM, it may still be an ACM. The standard pertains more to the sampling requirements rather than the application of building age to the asbestos survey requirement.

For further clarification on OSHA's viewpoint considering the requirement for an asbestos survey, regardless of the age of construction, we can look to OSHA interpretation letters. One letter, dated August 20, 1997, and addressed to William H. George, clearly states that "building owners must exercise due diligence in regard to identifying the presence of asbestos in TSI, surfacing material, vinyl flooring material, ceiling tile, joint compound, and other materials installed in buildings constructed after 1980."

Additionally, all building facilities scheduled for renovation or demolition (except for residential owner-occupied homes) must have an asbestos survey completed before the start of the renovation or demolition (NESHAP, 40 CFR Part 61, Subpart M). The "Notification of Intent to Renovate/Demolish" form required by the U.S. EPA NESHAP regulations specifically calls for asbestos inspection information, including the company performing the inspection, inspector's name and accreditation number, and date of the inspection. During past projects, Envirologic has experienced State representatives requesting survey information for buildings undergoing renovations, even if the building was constructed only a few years before the renovation activities.

Misconception #3: If asbestos is found, it needs to be removed.

You've probably heard that when buying a house, it's all about location, location, location. Well, when it comes to harmful exposure to ACMs, it's all about condition, condition, condition. One might reasonably think that any ACMs identified in an asbestos survey should be removed from the building because they're hazardous. In actuality, it is the condition of the building materials that creates the potential exposure hazard. Asbestos only becomes a hazard when the material is deteriorated and fibers are released that can be breathed in or, in some cases, ingested. The inhalation or ingestion of

asbestos fibers is what causes harmful health effects, such as lung cancer, mesothelioma, and stomach cancer.

When ACMs are identified in good condition during an asbestos survey, they are not required to be removed if good condition can be maintained. To prevent the potential for fiber release, do not disturb any ACMs that are left in place. An Operations and Maintenance (O&M) Plan should be prepared for any ACMs that will remain within the building. Prior to any renovation or demolition that has the potential to impact ACMs, removal of ACMs should be conducted by a licensed asbestos contractor in accordance with the OSHA asbestos standard. Personal and clearance air samples should be collected to demonstrate that asbestos fibers are not released through the abatement process.

While ACMs in good condition may remain in the building, once an asbestos survey has confirmed or assumed the presence of ACMs, all employees or contractors who work around and may contact, but not disturb, ACMs (e.g., persons conducting janitorial, building maintenance, security, and/or housekeeping activities) must receive, at minimum, two-hour asbestos awareness training. Additional training is required for workers who may impact ACMs.

In summary, the decision to abate ACMs identified in an asbestos survey is often based on material condition and/or the potential for impact with planned renovations.

Even though asbestos regulations have been in place for over half a century, misconceptions related to asbestos continue to persist. If reading the top three common misconceptions left you feeling overwhelmed with interpreting regulations, do not be dismayed. Envirologic prides itself on staying up to date with current regulations, training requirements, and standard industry protocols to ensure that we can meet our clients' varied needs with respect to all things asbestos related. If you have questions or would like clarification on Michigan's asbestos regulations, please contact Project Manager Therese Searles at (800) 272-7802 or via [email](#). Therese is a State of Michigan accredited asbestos inspector, and she (or another accredited member of our team) will be able to address your specific asbestos-related needs.