

Asbestos in soil

While the risks of working with asbestos in buildings have been known for many years, a lot has been discovered recently about the risks of asbestos in soil and how to manage them.

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THERE ARE MANY ways soil can become contaminated with asbestos:

- Rain and wind can slowly erode fibres off old cladding.
- Manufacturing waste containing asbestos may have been used as fill.
- Materials containing asbestos were dumped, legally and illegally.
- Waste left after demolition may contain asbestos fragments.
- A high-pressure waterblaster may have blasted fibres off wall cladding.

Asbestos can become airborne when dry

Asbestos fibres do not rot away. When the soil is dry, they can become airborne. It is

not just large-scale activity such as earthworks that can increase this risk - surprisingly, even something as simple as lawn mowing can move the fibres. BRANZ had its own experience of this when roofing on its fire laboratory was found to be shedding asbestos fibres. Fibres were found on the ground around the building, and where grass clippings were piled up.

When fibres become airborne, they become a health risk, so whenever asbestos in soil is suspected, action must be taken. The Asbestos Regulations, the Approved Code of Practice and the other documents all apply, but now there is help specifically for this area.

Guidelines have practical advice

BRANZ has produced *New Zealand Guidelines for Assessing and Managing Asbestos in Soil* in association with ALGA (the Australasian Land and Groundwater Association). The guidelines have a wealth of practical information around what to do if you think land is contaminated.

There is some practical advice:

- Talk to the local authority right from the start. They can help you find appropriate experts and guide you in the process.
- Keep contaminated soil damp with sprinklers or misters during investigations or

remediation work. Adding just 5% moisture can reduce airborne asbestos by 80-95%.

- Get soil samples tested to confirm if asbestos is present. You can't tell whether or not asbestos is there by sight - fibres can be 2,000 times thinner than a human hair.
- Contaminated soil doesn't always have to be removed. Limiting the use of the land or hard or soft capping on the contaminated soil may be options.

Also advice for PCBUs

BRANZ is also producing a smaller document specifically for PCBUs - persons conducting a business or undertaking - a role found in the Health and Safety at Work Act 2015. A PCBU can be an individual, a company, a partnership or a body corporate, and several could be involved with asbestos in soil.

This, and the guidelines, set out the key things that PCBUs need to know about asbestos-contaminated soil and the regulations. It sets out how asbestos gets into the soil and the key players who help with investigations and remediation work. ◀

For more ▶ The guidelines for assessing asbestos in soil can be downloaded at www.branz.co.nz/asbestos.