



ACT Rural Fire Service  
Standard Operating Procedure 3.16  
**Asbestos**

**3.16**  
Operational  
Management

### Purpose

This procedure establishes the practices to be followed to safely manage and mitigate the hazard (or perceived hazard) associated with the exposure to asbestos at incidents or during other RFS activities.

### Background

Asbestos is a naturally occurring rock fibre that is mined and then broken down from material clumps into groups of loose fibres. Asbestos is the generic term for a group of naturally occurring mineral fibres, the most significant types being:

- Chrysotile, or white asbestos;
- Amosite, or brown or grey asbestos;
- Crocidolite, or blue asbestos.

Of all the asbestos used in Australia, approximately 85% has been chrysotile, and 15% has been amosite and crocidolite.

Asbestos fibres are very small and may not be visible to the naked eye. Significant health risks may arise from the inhalation of airborne asbestos fibres and their passage into the lungs. Some fibres are referred to as respirable, meaning that they may enter the deepest part of the lung. Most of the fibres though are deposited in the nose and major airways, and are cleared by normal physiological processes. Inhalation of asbestos may result in cancer of the lungs, cancers of the chest lining (mesothelioma) and asbestosis, which is a progressive scarring of the lung tissue. Further development of scar tissue (known as fibrosis) may continue to occur after exposure to asbestos has ceased.

Generally, the smaller the fibres the greater the risk of a carcinogenic illness with the risk of cancer increasing as the diameter of the fibre decreases, the risk of cancer is also greater with prolonged exposure to asbestos.

Used in Australia between 1945 and 1988 asbestos fibres were often mixed with cement or woven into fabric or mats and made into construction products such as cement sheeting, insulation, pipes, paint, floor coverings, ceiling tiles and roofing materials.

Most commonly Asbestos can be found in two forms:

- a. Sprayed on material containing asbestos is the form that is of most concern. This method was used until the early 1970's as fireproofing, sound proofing, thermal



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insulation, acoustic plaster, and insulation applications. It may also be found in lagging surrounding old heating flues and pipes entering through old hot water systems. It takes a laboratory analysis to conclusively identify the presence and type of this asbestos;

- b. Asbestos, which has been incorporated into a stable matrix, this can be found in many working environments. Examples of products in which asbestos may have been incorporated include: vinyl asbestos tiles, laboratory table tops, asbestos rope and coil (utilised in heaters and woodstoves), roofing felts, suspended ceiling tiles, and asbestos cement products. These materials do not present a significant health risk unless they are tooled, cut, sanded or otherwise machined so as to release asbestos dust.

**Operating Procedure.**

Incident Controllers/Officers in Charge (IC/OIC) must assess every incident for all hazards including Asbestos. Special consideration should be given to incidents that involve a structure that was built prior to 1988, involves an area which appears to have dumped/rubbish construction material and areas that are known to have previously contained asbestos.

Any member who **suspects** asbestos material to be present must immediately inform the IC/OIC and if the existence of an asbestos hazard is suspected or confirmed the following is to apply.

1. All personnel at the location must immediately;
  - I. Be made aware of the hazard;
  - II. If at all practical, move away from the location of the suspected material;
  - III. If it is necessary to remain close to the suspected material, fit a P2 (or higher level) dust mask (AS/NZS 1716:2003: Respiratory Protective Devices);
  - IV. Ensure that vehicle doors and windows remain closed at all times;
  - V. And, if the Incident involves fire, remain out of the smoke plume (regardless of whether the suspected material is involved or not).
2. The area must be treated as hazardous and all non essential personnel should be kept away from the hot zone.
3. If, due to the nature of the incident, it becomes necessary for personnel to remain near the suspected material, then;
  - I. A water fog is to be applied to the material (wetting the disturbed material significantly minimize the amount of airborne material);



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**IMPORTANT – Avoid the use of high pressure sprays directly onto the suspect materials.**


- II. The affected area must be kept thoroughly wet with the continued application of water;
  - III. Personnel must avoid cutting, disturbing or unnecessary movement of any suspected material.
4. The IC/OIC is to advise the RFS Duty Officer via Comcen.

**NOTE - It must be remembered that material containing asbestos that is in good condition and not broken poses little threat but should still be treated with caution.**

**Decontamination**

If any personnel, equipment or vehicles are suspected of having been contaminated by asbestos material, you must;

1. Identify an area to be set aside ***upwind*** of the suspected asbestos site, where the personnel, equipment or vehicles are to be located. Consideration should be given to site location to avoid the need to move the site once established. Contaminated personnel must remain outside of vehicles as they make their way to the decontamination site, unless it is unsafe to do so.
2. The IC/OIC is to inform the RFS Duty Officer of the potential contamination of personnel, equipment or vehicles and the RFS Duty Officer is to request ACT Fire & Rescue HAZMAT attendance.
3. No personnel, piece of equipment or vehicle is to be removed from the decontamination site until cleared by ACT Fire & Rescue HAZMAT or the RFS Duty Officer (on the advice of ACT Fire & Rescue HAZMAT).
4. All contaminated personnel, equipment and vehicles will be inspected and decontaminated by ACT Fire & Rescue HAZMAT, some equipment and vehicles may not be able to be decontaminated onsite.
  - I. In the case of equipment it will be bagged and removed by ACT Fire & Rescue HAZMAT for offsite decontamination or disposal (PPE jackets and pants will be sent to a specialized laundry to be decontaminated);

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- II. The ACTRFS will organise the professional cleaning of any vehicle that ACT Fire & Rescue HAZMAT are unable to decontaminate onsite.

IC/OICs are to make note of what equipment has been removed for decontamination and forward this list to the RFS Duty Officer, who will send it on to the Manager, Operations. If any equipment is deemed contaminated – not for reissue, new equipment will be issued.

**IMPORTANT – Under no circumstances may personnel who are wearing suspected contaminated clothing/equipment enter vehicle cabins (unless there is a safety requirement for them to do so), return to station or private residence prior to undergoing the decontamination procedures.**

Once decontaminated the IC/OIC must make arrangements for the effected personnel to be returned to station.

**IMPORTANT – Should a member return to station or their residence and discover a piece of contaminated equipment/clothing it should be immediately placed in a sealed bag and the RFS Duty Officer notified. The RFS Duty Officer will then inform ACT Fire & Rescue to take appropriate action.**

### Post exposure procedures

#### 1. Onsite

The IC/OIC is to make a list of all personnel and vehicles that were onsite during the Incident/Activity. This list is to be sent to the RFS Duty Officer, who will then forward it on to; the Manager, Membership (In the case of personnel) and the Manager, Operations (In the case of equipment/vehicles).

The suspected area is to be taped off by ACT Fire & Rescue HAZMAT with barrier tape or by RFS personnel if ACT Fire & Rescue HAZMAT is not present. The IC/OIC is to inform the relevant Land Holder in the case of private or rural property of the suspected asbestos and its location and the RFS Duty Officer will do the same for ACT Government Land and other land tenures.

#### 2. Offsite

The RFS Duty Officer will contact Worksafe ACT and inform them of the incident and the location of the suspected asbestos.



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All personnel who were present at the site must complete Accident/incident forms, this is to occur whether the members were exposed or not. The forms must be sent to Manager, Membership within 24 hours.

All personnel who may have been exposed, or who are suspected to have been exposed, to airborne asbestos will undergo a medical assessment organised by the RFS.

**Maintained By:** Manager, Operations

**Approved By:** Andrew Stark

**Signature:**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'A. Stark', written over a horizontal line.

**Cross Reference SOP/s:**

**Position:** Chief Officer RFS

**Date:**

11/12/12

**Amendments:** V2 – 17/12/2012