



## University of Massachusetts Amherst Asbestos Awareness Information Sheet

### **Q: What is asbestos?**

**A:** Asbestos is a naturally occurring fibrous mineral. Naturally occurring asbestos (NOA) includes fibrous minerals found in certain types of rock formations. Natural weathering or human disturbance can break NOA down to microscopic fibers, easily suspended in air.

### **Q: In what capacity was asbestos first used?**

**A:** Asbestos was first used as a component of building materials due to its versatility; it is an extremely resilient, chemically, and thermally stable material that withstands erosion and decay. It was commonly used as plaster, pipe insulation, floor tiles, fire proofing and in other building materials. No asbestos containing materials are allowed in new construction at the University.

### **Q: Are there health hazards related to asbestos exposure?**

**A:** Health related hazards related to asbestos exposure only occur when asbestos containing materials are damaged or disturbed. Disruption causes microscopic fibers of asbestos to become airborne. These small fibers are easily inhaled and may lodge in the lungs. Significant health problems associated with asbestos exposure include: lung cancer, mesothelioma, and asbestosis.

### **Q: How does asbestos become lodged in the lungs?**

**A:** Asbestos fibers may become trapped in the mucous membranes of the nose and throat where they can be removed, however, smaller fibers may pass deep into the lungs or if swallowed, into the digestive track.

### **Q: How can one determine if a material contains asbestos?**

**A:** The manufacturer, product detail, or product labeling may identify the asbestos content of a material. The only method used to positively identify the asbestos content of a material is to hire a qualified inspector to sample and analyze the material through microscopy in a qualified asbestos analysis laboratory.

### **Q: How much asbestos is dangerous to human health?**

**A:** No minimum concentration of asbestos fibers in the air exists that is considered safe for humans to inhale on a continual basis. The risk of developing adverse health effects is dependent on the amount of asbestos inhaled and the duration of the exposure. (Duration is typically measured in years) Symptoms of lung problems do not appear usually until after 20-30 years of exposure to high levels of asbestos fibers (as might be found in an

industrial setting). It is rare for people to develop health problems after exposure to small amounts of asbestos.

**Q: How can asbestos exposure be minimized or prevented?**

**A:** By maintaining materials in intact and sealed conditions will prevent asbestos exposure. If asbestos containing materials must be disturbed (for demolition, construction, etc) a combination of engineering controls and dust suppression methods prevents exposure to building occupants and minimizes exposure to asbestos.

**Q: Are there protocols in place at UMass that outline proper management and disposal techniques to protect workers, students, and the environment from asbestos?**

**A:** Yes, the University of Massachusetts complies with all State and Federal regulations and all asbestos workers, supervisors, inspectors, and monitors are licensed by the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

**Q: Who do I contact if I think I've encountered exposure in the work place?**

**A:** Contact Al Sorensen, EHS Industrial Hygienist at 545-2682 or the Physical Plant Environmental Services Unit at 545-6401.