

Firefighters and the Risks Involved with Asbestos Exposure



Firefighters face a number of occupational hazards. In fact, their job description includes going into flame- and smoke-laden structures, but firefighters also risk their lives when they come into contact with asbestos.

Many older buildings contain asbestos in their construction materials. Ironically, these products contained asbestos because the fibers were extremely fire-resistant. Asbestos was frequently used as insulation until the 1980s, when the government began regulating the use of the carcinogenic fibers. However, these materials may still be in place today.

When asbestos-contaminated products catch on fire, they may crack or crumble. This can release asbestos into the air, which is what makes asbestos dangerous. Firefighters may also create exposure hazards by tearing through asbestos-contaminated walls or ceilings to make sure that they have extinguished all of the flames.

Airborne asbestos can cause a number of diseases, including [pleural mesothelioma](#) and lung cancer. Because of the numerous exposure threats associated with the occupation, these illnesses are especially common among firefighters.

Where Firefighters may Encounter Asbestos Hazards

Older buildings may contain thousands of different asbestos-containing products. These products can be located anywhere in the house. Some of the most common asbestos materials include:

- Vermiculite attic insulation
- Pipe, wiring or duct insulation
- Fiberboard and particleboard

- Shingles and roofing adhesives
- Textured coatings
- Plaster
- Tiles

[Firefighters](#) also may encounter asbestos in their protective gear. Most fire departments have upgraded their protective gear over the years, but older helmets and coats may contain asbestos fibers.

Some newer suits and gloves may even have low quantities of asbestos. Although it is rare for firefighters to still use asbestos-contaminated fire safety gear, these items still pose a slim exposure threat.

How Firefighters Can Protect Their Health

Safety gear is generally a firefighter's first line of defense against asbestos. Modern self-contained breathing apparatuses do protect workers against airborne asbestos exposure. Workers should always wear full-body safety gear during every operation that could potentially disturb asbestos. Workers should also confirm that their gear is asbestos-free.

While safety gear does act as a barrier between the firefighters and the fibers, firefighters may accidentally inhale asbestos while removing or cleaning their protective gear. The [National Fire Protection Association](#) (code 1851) recommends the following methods for handling asbestos-contaminated gear:

- Wash gear alone (away from other clothing)
- Use washers and dryers that are specially designated for asbestos-contaminated gear
- Use additional rinse cycles
- Wear respirators and sleeved aprons during cleaning
- Vacuum the item with High Efficiency Particulate Air (HEPA) filters
- Leave gear in designated storage spaces at the fire station

Firefighters should also shower to rinse away any asbestos residue before heading home. This reduces their household's risk of secondhand exposure.

Throughout their career, firefighters should also participate in regular asbestos-related disease screenings. These tests can help detect abnormalities in their earliest stages, when treatment is most effective. Fire unions periodically organize these screenings, but workers can also obtain them at local hospitals.

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