

Asbestos exposure in New Zealand

The facts about asbestos

- Asbestos is a “complete carcinogen” – once it has been inhaled no other agent or co-agent is required to cause a malignant mutation.
- In 1986 the World Health Organisation said **no** level of exposure to asbestos could be considered safe. The European Parliament has agreed to eradicate asbestos by 2028.
- The New Zealand government continues to allow the importation of asbestos-containing products despite the risks involved.
- The presence of asbestos and the use of asbestos-containing products is unmonitored in New Zealand.
- Rates of asbestos-related disease have more than doubled since 1994.

Health and safety in the workplace

- Carpenters, plumbers and electricians make up 67% of all registered cases of asbestos disease.
- The Health and Safety in Employment Act 1992 requires employers to take all practicable steps to monitor workers’ exposure to asbestos when it has been identified.
- However, demolition and maintenance workers rarely receive annual health monitoring or refresher training.

The Christchurch rebuild

- In Christchurch, the EQC has decided to leave asbestos which is in “good condition” in residential houses. Around 43,500 homes may contain asbestos. If the asbestos is not damaged or deteriorating the EQC policy is to encapsulate it in plasterboard.
- However, no register is being kept as to where asbestos has been identified and encapsulated. This poses a risk to future workers.

Our recommendations

We call on the Government to:

- create a register for asbestos in Christchurch
- make working with asbestos notifiable under workplace health and safety legislation
- ban the importation of asbestos-containing products
- upgrade the standards relating to asbestos and investigate whether asbestos identified in a building should be noted in LIM reports
- create a national plan to eliminate asbestos from the built environment by 2030
- create a system for medical practitioners to notify Government of all potential asbestos-related conditions.