

ASBESTOS

- Hidden dangers, let's get clarity



Responsible for around 220 deaths each year, asbestos is New Zealand's leading workplace killer - but despite its widely known risks, businesses and tradespeople are still failing to protect their workers.

Earlier this month WorkSafe sentenced and fined a well-known carpet franchisee and one of its subcontractors following a poorly handled flooring job which posed a significant health risk. Hired to replace the flooring in a residential home, the subcontractor ripped up and disposed of the old vinyl without considering the asbestos risk - vinyl which later tested positive for chrysotile asbestos.

The franchisee was fined \$52,500 for putting the health and safety of others at risk, while the subcontractor was fined \$1100 for failing to identify the risk and remove it before the refurbishment started. WorkSafe General Inspectorate head Simon Humphries says the sentencing should serve as a grave reminder to businesses and tradies of the dangers of asbestos - and the importance of adhering to an asbestos management plan.

"This unfortunate incident shows how even well-known operators can be caught out on the basics of asbestos safety," says Simon. "It's not OK to assume there is no risk and you are in the clear. Businesses have a duty to identify and manage risks associated with asbestos, and management plans are required for workplaces where asbestos or asbestos-containing material has been identified or is likely to be present."

Asbestos is a naturally occurring mineral that was widely used in building materials in New Zealand from the 1940s through to the 1980s, but according to WorkSafe, any buildings constructed or renovated prior to 2000 could contain asbestos materials. What makes it so dangerous is the fact that it's made up of tiny carcinogenic fibres, and if disturbed or removed, these fibres can become airborne. Inhaling these fibres can cause a number of nasty cancers including asbestosis, lung cancer and mesothelioma.

For businesses and workers looking for clarity on their asbestos-related roles and responsibilities, Safety 'n Action is an excellent port of call. New Zealand's leading workplace health and safety training provider, they offer a range of Asbestos training solutions to equip teams with the skills and knowledge they need to deal with the proven human carcinogenic.

“Asbestos is one of the country's most deadly workplace killers so it's vital that businesses and workers know what to look for and what to do if they find it,” says Safety 'n Action National Training Director Nicholas Matzopoulos. “Our half-day Asbestos Awareness Seminar is ideal for anyone working in any sort of construction, demolition or refurbishment as not only does it cover legislation and new asbestos licencing, but it also gives a broad overview of the dangers of asbestos, where you're likely to come across it, and how to safely remove and dispose of it.” <https://www.safetynaction.co.nz/en/our-courses/course-catalogue/asbestos-awareness-seminar/>

The seminar covers removal and disposal of up to 10m² of non-friable asbestos – but Nicholas says to legally remove more than that, PCBUs need to have an Asbestos Removal Licence from WorkSafe, and NZQA accredited training is a prerequisite of this new licensing system. “That's where Safety 'n Action's Non-Friable Asbestos Class B course comes in. This interactive two-day programme is ideal for builders, electricians, plumbers, drainlayers and other tradies – basically anyone working on a site that's likely to contain asbestos, or anyone who may need to sample or remove non-friable asbestos or Asbestos Containing Material (ACM).” <https://www.safetynaction.co.nz/en/our-courses/course-catalogue/non-friable-asbestos-class-b/>

With programmes like these – and a wealth of information also available on the WorkSafe website [<https://www.worksafe.govt.nz/topic-and-industry/asbestos/>] – there's no excuse for getting caught out on the basics of asbestos safety. So, let's get clarity on the hidden dangers of this deadly carcinogenic, and let's start better protecting our people from Aotearoa New Zealand's biggest workplace killer.