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Asbestos risks in safes and fire resistant cabinets

The Authority is aware that concerns have been raised regarding the presence of asbestos in some older models of safes and secure/fireproof filing cabinets. The following Information Note has been prepared to help clarify the risks involved and to give advice on how to manage the relevant risks while complying with the Exposure to Asbestos Regulations¹.

BACKGROUND

In the past and because of its useful fire-retardant properties, asbestos was used by certain safe and cabinet manufacturers as a door jointing seal in specific products. Asbestos was also sometimes contained in a packing or “barrier” material inserted and sealed during manufacture within the doors or walls of safes or cabinets. In the case of the leading European and American manufacturers, the use of asbestos in their product range was generally phased out from the 1960’s to the 1980’s depending on the manufacturer.

However the use of asbestos in manufactured products continued to be legally permitted until 2000. In that year an EU-wide ban on the marketing of asbestos-containing products was extended to include white (chrysotile) asbestos.

THE RISKS

- An asbestos-containing door jointing seal often takes the form of a woven strip or tape attached to the door frame. A seal in good condition should not present any risk of exposure to asbestos fibres in air. However it is possible for the seal to become damaged due to abrasion over a lifetime of use. While the resultant risk of exposure to asbestos would likely be assessed as low, nonetheless certain good practice measures should be taken to manage this risk (see below).
- The potential presence of asbestos-containing barrier material sealed in the door or walls of a safe or filing cabinet should not present any risk of exposure during normal use of the safe or cabinet. If there is any evidence of a loss of containment of the internal packing/barrier material of a pre-2000 safe or fireproof cabinet, it must be taken out of service and remain undisturbed until the material is tested by an asbestos consultant or otherwise confirmed to be asbestos-free.

The original manufacturer of a particular pre-2000 make and model of safe or fireproof cabinet may be in a position to confirm that its internal packing/barrier material does not contain asbestos. Some leading brand manufacturers may give reassurances on their products going back several decades. Your local safe supplier/distributor may be able to assist in getting this information. Where the asbestos-free status of your pre-2000 safe or cabinet cannot be established or is uncertain, it must be presumed to contain asbestos.

A presumption of asbestos content will not affect the day-to-day usage of the safe or cabinet. However certain emergency safe opening practices such as destructive cutting of a safe must not be permitted as these activities could result in disturbance and release of asbestos fibres from the internal packing. Even non-destructive “precision drill opening” of a safe presumed to contain asbestos must be carried out

under strictly controlled conditions (see below). Likewise, it is not considered safe to carry out any modification works on a safe presumed to contain asbestos if those works involve breaching the walls or door (e.g. for the retrofit installation of a slot deposit system).

MANAGING THE RISKS

- If you are concerned that your pre-2000 safe or filing cabinet may have an asbestos jointing seal, you need to arrange for it to be checked by a competent asbestos consultant. The trained asbestos consultant will confirm whether asbestos is present or otherwise and can also advise on the necessary risk management measures. These measures may range from (i) a simple periodic check that the seal remains in good condition to (ii) a recommendation to apply an encapsulating paint or adhesive in case of minor damage or (iii) a recommendation that the jointing seal is removed by a specialist contractor under controlled conditions where the seal is assessed to be beyond repair. These remedial measures are likely to be cost-effective in comparison with replacement of the safe.
- For emergency opening of a safe presumed to contain an asbestos packing/barrier and which is fitted with a mechanical key or combination lock, employ a competent safe and vault technician, who is expert at manipulative or “pick” opening of safes without the need to drill. Most safes that are fitted with a mechanical lock can be opened by an expert technician without resorting to drilling. This should not present any risk of exposure to asbestos.

In the unusual event that precision drilling is deemed necessary to open the safe, it should be carried out by a competent safe and vault technician with the assistance of a specialist asbestos contractor. The role of the asbestos contractor is to manage the asbestos risk by capturing any dust arising from the activity with a suitable (hepa-filtered) vacuum device. The task should be carried out in a controlled manner and should be subject to a thorough risk assessment to ensure that internal barrier material/dust is not released during or subsequent to the drilling operation. The safe technician will securely reseal the drill hole.

SECOND-HAND SAFES & FIRE RESISTANT CABINETS

The EU-wide ban² on the marketing and sale of asbestos-containing products also applies to second-hand or refurbished safes and cabinets that contain or are presumed to contain asbestos. End-of-life safes that are presumed to contain asbestos must be treated as hazardous waste and be subject to appropriate disposal requirements.

1. Safety, Health and Welfare at Work (Exposure to Asbestos) Regulations 2006 and 2010
2. Regulation (EC) No. 1907/2006 concerning the Registration, Evaluation, Authorisation and Restriction of Chemicals (REACH), as substituted by Commission Regulation (EC) No. 552/2009 and subject to any exemption granted by the Health and Safety Authority in accordance with the Chemicals (Asbestos Articles) Regulations, S.I. No. 248 of 2011

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