



A guide to

Work on Vinyl Asbestos Floor Coverings

Introduction

Some vinyl floor coverings, including tiles, contain asbestos, either in the vinyl itself or more commonly in the backing. There is minimal release of asbestos fibre during ordinary use of the flooring, but significant levels can be created when the material is sanded. The sanding of floors after partially lifting vinyl-asbestos coverings has been found to generate extremely high asbestos fibre levels.

What are the health risks?

Asbestos can cause asbestosis, lung cancer and mesothelioma, if sufficient asbestos fibres are deposited in the lungs. Most researchers believe there is an exposure “threshold” (or amount of asbestos fibre that must be exceeded) before a disease develops, and that the risk is related to the lifetime respiratory dose of asbestos.

The risk of lung cancer is increased considerably in people who are exposed to asbestos and smoke cigarettes. For this reason, it is strongly recommended that people working with asbestos do not smoke.

Legal requirements

Under the Health and Safety in Employment (Asbestos) Regulations 1998, dry sanding of floor coverings containing asbestos is classified as restricted work and must be notified to OSH before work begins. The work must be carried out or be supervised by a person holding a certificate of competence for work involving asbestos. The OSH publication *Guidelines for the Management and Removal of Asbestos* provides information on the practicable steps that can be taken to comply with the regulations. Copies of the guidelines are available from local OSH offices.

Safe working procedures on flooring containing asbestos

Options

When the flooring material containing asbestos is to be replaced, the options include:

- Leaving the material in place and fixing a new covering over the top — sometimes using a thin composite board to create a smooth surface over the old flooring.
- Removing the flooring by scraping with a spade or other flat tool.
- Sanding to obtain a suitable surface for the new product. This last option should only be taken after all reasonable steps have been taken to remove the old flooring.

Leaving the old flooring in place involves the least risk, but just defers the problem. The preferred option is to completely remove the product using a method that minimises asbestos exposure.

Work methods

- **Plan the job to minimise exposure.** All practicable steps must be taken to minimise the asbestos exposure of the people carrying out the work and other persons in the building. Where appropriate, relocate the building's occupants during the work.
- **Sanding floors.** Power sanding of floors that have residues of vinyl-asbestos coverings must be kept to a minimum. The surface should be wetted to minimise the release of asbestos fibres. Water is the safest liquid to use for wetting floors when sanding, but some contractors prefer to use kerosene as it does not clog the abrasive or stain the flooring. If a flammable liquid is used, extreme care must be taken to avoid ignition.

Sanding equipment used on floors that have residues of vinyl-asbestos should not be used for other jobs.

- **Dry sanding** is classified as restricted work and may only be carried out by a person holding a certificate of competence for work involving asbestos. Complete isolation of the area and the use of extraction ventilation to provide a negative pressure in the work area would be expected when dry sanding a floor.

Wet sanding

The following procedures should be used when wet sanding floors:

- The work area should be sealed or isolated from other parts of the building. Normally, this would involve using plastic sheeting or other suitable material to seal off all doors and entrance ways.
- Cupboards and drawers should either be sealed or emptied before beginning work.
- The floor should be wetted by “mopping” with kerosene or water to help suppress dust.
- All operators should wear “single use” overalls which must be treated as asbestos waste on completion of the job. Overalls may be used for several jobs but they must be sealed in a plastic bag between jobs.
- All operators should wear a half-facepiece respirator with a class P1 filter suitable for asbestos dust, or a combination P1 organic vapour filter if kerosene has been used.
- Clean-up procedures should be carried out thoroughly by first vacuuming residues and dust from all surfaces, followed by wet mopping. The vacuum cleaner should be fitted with a HEPA filter and the cleanings disposed of as asbestos waste.
- Where sanding has been carried out in service rooms such as kitchens, cupboards and drawers not previously sealed should be vacuumed and wiped down with wetted rags.
- All asbestos-contaminated waste (including rags used for wet wiping) must be disposed of in properly labelled and sealed bags.
- Equipment used to sand floors should be cleaned by vacuuming and wet wiping before being removed from the job.

Further information and advice

For more information about working with products that contain asbestos, contact your local Occupational Safety and Health office.