Policy Title: Asbestos

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Policies Superseded: FINA-706, HREO-1854  
Review/revision(s): April 2016

Responsible Office: Environmental Health and Safety

SUMMARY:

This policy outlines the health risks associated with asbestos exposure.

POLICY:

I. ASBESTOS

1. Asbestos is the name of a group of silicate minerals that occur naturally in the environment. It differs from other minerals in its crystal development, which are long, thin fibers. These fibers are very strong and resistant to heat and chemicals. For these reasons, asbestos was used in many building materials including floor tiles, ceiling tiles, plumbing and HVAC insulation, acoustical and decorative coatings, and roofing materials. These types of building materials are presumed to contain asbestos if installed before 1980, unless testing has proven otherwise.

B. When left intact and undisturbed, these materials do not pose a health risk to building occupants. There is a potential for exposure only when the material becomes damaged to the extent that asbestos fibers become airborne and are inhaled. Asbestos is more likely to release fibers when it is friable. The term “friable” means the material can be easily crumbled. If powdered or friable forms of asbestos are disturbed and become airborne, an inhalation hazard may result. In non-friable materials like floor tile, ceiling tiles, laboratory cabinet tops, and caulks, the asbestos fibers are tightly bound in a matrix which prevents the release of fibers to the environment unless the material is abraded, sanded or sawed.

For those exposed to asbestos, several factors may influence whether harmful health effects will occur. These factors include the dose (how much), the duration (how long), and whether or not you smoke. Generally, adverse health effects from asbestos are the result of chronic (long-term) exposure to high concentration of airborne asbestos fibers. According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), airborne asbestos levels in
buildings are typically very much lower than those identified in industrial workplaces.

C. The following are the summaries of five major facts that EPA has presented in congressional testimony.

1. Although asbestos is hazardous, human risk of asbestos disease depends upon exposure.

2. Based on available data from across the nation, prevailing asbestos levels in buildings appear to be very low. Accordingly, the health risk faced by building occupants also appears to be very low.

3. Removal is often not a building owner’s best course of action to reduce asbestos exposure. In fact, an improper removal can create a dangerous situation where one did not previously exist.

4. EPA only requires asbestos removal in order to prevent significant public exposure to asbestos, such as during building renovation or demolition.

5. EPA does recommend in-place management whenever asbestos is discovered. Instead of removal, a conscientious in-place management program will usually control fiber releases, particularly when the materials are not significantly damaged and are not likely to be disturbed.

Asbestos Procedures

When intact and undisturbed, asbestos building materials do not pose a health risk for building occupants.

Damaged asbestos-containing materials should be reported to the Department of Environmental Health and Safety; never attempt to handle damaged asbestos.

Specially trained personnel are needed to visit the area, determine if a suspect material contains asbestos, and perform a hazard assessment.

All work involving removal will be performed by licensed and certified workers in accordance with Federal, State and local regulations. A permit from SC-DHEC is required for asbestos removal operations. The contractor will conduct repair, maintenance or cleanup of asbestos-containing material.

Adherence to applicable regulations is important to assure protection of workers, building occupants and the environment.