



ASBESTOS FAQ

The School District of Philadelphia has nearly 300 buildings, and almost every one of them contains some form of asbestos. It is usually found in floor and ceiling tiles, pipe wrap insulation, as well as some plaster and paint. The presence of asbestos is not itself a danger, however it is when asbestos materials are disturbed and fibers can become airborne it must be managed. That is why federal law requires all school Districts to check on asbestos materials twice a year so they can be maintained. Room-by-room logs of every school and the location and condition of asbestos materials at the time of inspection are found on the [District's website](#).

Here are some Frequently Asked Questions about asbestos and how the District manages it:

What is asbestos?

Asbestos is a naturally occurring mineral made of flexible fiber that is strong and heat resistant, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency ([EPA](#)). Asbestos was widely used in building construction materials for its excellent insulation and fire retardant properties. Asbestos was used in many common building materials and is present in many buildings built before 1978.

When is asbestos a concern?

Asbestos-containing material may become damaged during regular use, building maintenance, or repair, and when materials are damaged they may cause fibers to be released into the air, where they could be inhaled. Exposure to air fibers can increase the risk of health effects, including lung cancer, mesothelioma and asbestosis.

According to the [National Cancer Institute](#), almost everyone is exposed to asbestos in our daily lives, and most people do not become ill. People who develop health effects are usually those who are exposed to asbestos on a regular basis, including in a job where they work directly with the material.

Are schools with asbestos-containing materials unhealthy?

No. The presence of asbestos is not itself a risk when in good condition. The federal Asbestos Hazard Emergency Response Act ([AHERA](#)) requires that all schools be inspected twice a year to identify any changes in the condition of asbestos containing materials. Schools are the only structures with inspections required to be conducted this frequently.

Why not just remove all asbestos from buildings?

According to the [EPA](#), managing asbestos in place and maintaining it in good repair is often the best approach. The health risks from asbestos occur when it is damaged or disturbed to an extent that asbestos fibers can be released into the air and inhaled.

Why not just remove all asbestos from buildings? (continued)

From a practical, financial and logistical perspective, there is no way to remove all the asbestos-containing floor and ceiling tiles, paint, plaster, insulation and other materials across nearly 300 buildings in the District without billions of dollars, many years of work and shutting down schools over long periods of time.

What laws govern how the District manages asbestos? And what types of protections for kids, staff, parents and teachers are embedded in these regulations that should give us confidence in the District's program?

There are two separate but overlapping federal sets of rules which largely govern how the District manages:

- The Asbestos Hazard Emergency Response Act ([AHERA](#)) and the Clean Air Act are two separate but overlapping federal sets of rules governing how the District manages asbestos. The City of Philadelphia has applied even more rigor to these federal standards through its Asbestos Control Regulation (ACR).
- The Asbestos Hazard Emergency Response Act ([AHERA](#)) provides **consistent mandates to every U.S. school district** to protect the health and safety of school children and employees from asbestos exposure. The federal law has specific guidelines and mandates that must be performed by certified professionals.
- AHERA requires that the District monitor all asbestos in our buildings through 3-year inspections and 6-month check-ups.
- The [Clean Air Act](#) specifically addresses how asbestos is identified and handled prior to and during construction, demolition, and renovation.
- The ACR adds layers of protection by requiring additional licensing, documentation, containment measures, and sampling.



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When are inspections conducted, and who conducts them?

- Inspections are conducted in the evenings and weekends, outside of school hours, when students and staff are not in the buildings.
- The District's Office of Environmental Management & Services (OEMS) manages asbestos abatement and ensures that properly accredited professionals perform inspections and response actions and maintains management plans.
- The District brought in an outside firm with expertise in environmental compliance, Tetra Tech, to manage the District's inspections and generate the required data and reports.
- In addition to the regularly scheduled inspections required by AHERA the District's Building Engineers are charged with identifying asbestos hazards on a daily basis as they conduct maintenance and operations for each of the schools.

What is abatement? Who is allowed to do it?

- Abatement is the repair, encapsulation or covering; or removal of asbestos materials.
- Experts who complete this work are trained and certified by the state in asbestos abatement work practices and techniques.

How can routine asbestos work be conducted safely while schools are still open?

- All asbestos work is done in the evening or on weekends, outside of school hours when students and staff have left the building.
- The work is conducted by those licensed and trained in the handling of asbestos materials, and in accordance with strict federal and city protocols.
- Air sampling is conducted for abatement, to assess the abatement work, and to confirm the air in the space meets with safety standards for reopening when the work is done.

How is a school notified of a scheduled inspection or of asbestos abatement?

The school's principal, Facilities Area Manager and Building Engineer are notified by email before scheduled inspections and routine maintenance. The Philadelphia Federation of Teachers is also copied on the notification.

What resources has the School District of Philadelphia put into handling asbestos?

The District has taken several steps to advance its asbestos management program, including obtaining outside assistance for AHERA inspections and the data these inspections produce. Large schools can have more than 3,000 materials room by room that are inspected.

How can I see the status of the District's asbestos work?

Recent school inspection reports can be found on the [District's website](#). These include a three-year inspection, and the District will begin posting 6-month surveillance reports into these folders on a rolling basis as they are finalized.

Where can I learn more about asbestos and health?

- U.S. Environmental Protection Agency: ABCs of Asbestos in Schools:
<https://www.epa.gov/sites/default/files/documents/abcsfinal.pdf>
- ATSDR (part of Centers for Disease Control and Prevention): Asbestos and Health: Frequently Asked Questions:
https://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/noa/docs/Asbestos-FAQ_ENG_web.pdf