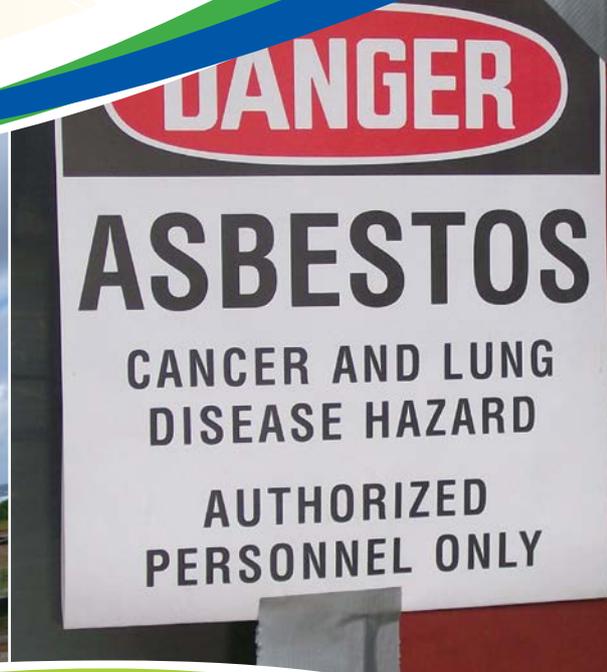


Asbestos in the Pacific

PacWaste (Pacific Hazardous Waste) is a four-year project funded by the European Union and implemented by SPREP to improve regional hazardous waste management across the Pacific. A major component of the €7.85 million project is to take action to improve regional asbestos management across 13 Pacific island countries and territories.



Left: Asbestos in damaged building materials can be a health risk.

Photo: E.Richards/
SPREP

Right: Asbestos waste must be managed properly to protect people from exposure.

What is asbestos?

Asbestos is a naturally occurring rock fibre that was widely used in the past in building materials, insulation, brake linings, roofing products, electrical and other consumer products because of its flame retardant properties and other qualities. Due to the known health effects, asbestos is now banned from most modern products.



How does it affect my health?

When products containing asbestos are damaged or wear down over time, small fibres are released into the air and are easily inhaled. The asbestos fibres travel to the lungs where they can remain lodged and cause inflammation and scarring of the lung tissue. The harmful effects of asbestos are not immediate, instead disease can appear years or decades after exposure. This can result in asbestosis, mesothelioma and other lung cancers.

Asbestos and Pacific island communities

Asbestos in building materials has been widely reported across the Pacific in countries such as the Cook Islands, Nauru, Niue, Tonga and the Solomon Islands. Older, weathered buildings and unmanaged waste stockpiles containing asbestos are a potential risk to island communities.

Natural events such as cyclones compound the problem, as they destroy or damage buildings containing asbestos. This can result in potential exposure to emergency personnel and the general community during disaster cleanup operations. Demolition workers involved in tearing down asbestos containing structures may also be placed at risk.

How will PacWaste address asbestos?

PacWaste is collecting information from 13 Pacific island countries and territories to identify the distribution of asbestos, its condition and how asbestos waste is currently managed in the region. This will enable prioritisation of future actions to assist Pacific islands in improving asbestos waste management and better protect their communities.

Some of these actions will include:

- stabilisation of asbestos in public buildings, schools, hospitals and houses
- training in asbestos handling and provision of personal protective equipment to people involved in asbestos waste management and disaster response
- removal of asbestos waste stockpiles from priority locations.

PacWaste will take similar action on two other hazardous waste types identified as a priority for the Pacific – healthcare waste and E-waste.



Although asbestos is a natural material, inhaling the fibres can cause disease later in life.

Photo: Chmee2 /Wikimedia Commons



Asbestos must be properly secured to prevent re-exposure.

Photo: E.Richards/ SPREP



Previously intact materials containing asbestos can become dangerous following natural disasters.

Photo: E.Richards/ SPREP



All workers potentially exposed to asbestos must wear personal protective equipment.

Find out more

For more information about asbestos and PacWaste go to www.sprep.org/pacwaste

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