Campus Asbestos Abatement Projects: Frequently Asked Questions

Caltech Environmental Health & Safety

About asbestos and potential risks

1. Why would there be asbestos in our buildings?

Before about 1980, asbestos was widely used in building materials such as pipe insulation, floor tiles, mastic, plaster, and joint compound. Several research and administrative buildings, including several student houses, are on Caltech's list of buildings built before 1980. Materials in those buildings are treated as asbestos-containing until testing confirms they are not.

2. Have I been exposed to working, living or eating here?

No. Having asbestos in a building does not by itself mean there is a health hazard. Asbestos is only a risk when fibers get into the air and are breathed in. Intact, sealed, or well-maintained materials like floor tiles and wrapped pipe insulation pose little or no risk. Caltech sends a notice every year about asbestos-containing materials on campus, as California law requires.

3. If it's safe if undisturbed, why remove it?

During renovation or infrastructure upgrade, asbestos-containing material is identified prior to starting work. Removing it before other work prevents accidental disturbance later, and Caltech's program aims to eventually remove all asbestos from campus facilities.

4. What are the health effects of asbestos?

Breathing in airborne fibers, usually through long-term or repeated exposure, can cause lung cancer, mesothelioma, and asbestosis. The controls described below are designed to prevent fibers from getting outside of the immediate work area.

How the work is done

5. Who is doing the asbestos removal?

A licensed abatement contractor who holds both a specialized state license and an active safety registration with Cal/OSHA, with certified supervisors and workers. Caltech requires that all contractors selected for abatement to provide proof of certification and display their active Cal/OSHA registration during abatement work.

6. Who checks the contractor's work?

A separate Certified Asbestos Consultant (CAC), and Certified Site Surveillance Technicians who do air monitoring. Caltech policy doesn't allow the same company to both test and remove asbestos. Caltech EH&S oversees the project and reviews the contractor's certifications and work plan prior to work award.

7. What are the "containment" and warning signs I am seeing?

California regulations require specific asbestos signage during an abatement project. These signs will be posted outside of the work area to alert people to the work inside the containment. Please do not enter or disturb any posted containment area.

8. How is the work area secured and kept safe?

Areas undergoing active asbestos abatement are controlled by restricting physical access to the work area through locked doors and/or temporary physical barriers. Warning signs are posted at the boundary, and doors, windows, and building ventilation openings in the area are sealed.

Inside the control area, the area is sealed with plastic sheeting and has a decontamination entry/exit. HEPA-filtered negative air machines keep the inside at lower pressure than the outside, so air flows into the work area, not out.

9. Why are the workers wearing suits and respirators if it's safe?

The area outside the containment zone is completely safe. Only trained contractors work inside the sealed area where the material is handled. Cal/OSHA requires them to wear protective gear inside that zone. It doesn't mean there's a hazard outside the containment.

10. Are government regulators involved?

Yes. Before work starts, the contractor notifies the South Coast Air Quality Management District (SCAQMD) under Rule 1403 and notifies Cal/OSHA. Large projects require SCAQMD to review and approve the work plan before abatement can proceed. SCAQMD or Cal/OSHA can inspect the work site at any time.

11. Is the air being monitored?

Yes, during the abatement project, abatement contractors are required to monitor the air inside the work area to ensure that their workers are not exposed to asbestos during the removal. California requires air monitoring to be conducted by a 3rd party CAC that is not connected to the contractor.

Caltech also requires that abatement projects in indoor work areas be cleared for asbestos via air monitoring at the end of the project. This check ensures the space is safe to reoccupy before ending the project. The air monitoring clearance criterion is based on the EPA re-occupancy standard.

12. Will the building's air handling spread fibers?

During abatement work, where applicable, HVAC openings inside the work area are sealed off or shut down, and the HEPA air machines exhaust through filters within the contained work area.

13. Do I need to move out/relocate my work area?

Any relocation or access restriction will be determined in coordination with the Certified Asbestos Consultant (CAC) and Caltech EH&S and communicated to affected occupants based on the specific project.

Unless you have received a notification that your work or living area is inside the abatement zone and that you must vacate it, you do not need to relocate. The work zone is sealed and contained. Areas outside the containment stay in normal use.

14. Will it be noisy or disruptive?

Expect noise from the air machines (they may run 24/7 while containment is up), restricted areas, and work vehicles. If there are questions or concerns please direct it to the primary contacts listed on the PP Service Interruption Notice or contact the EH&S Office.

Before, during and after

15. When will I be told if there is work planned?

Project dates may change while regulatory approvals and contractor mobilization are being finalized. An updated Service Interruption Notice that specifically mentions asbestos will be sent as soon as dates are confirmed, and before work starts. Updates are sent regularly, as well as an all clear when the work is complete.

16. How do I know work is done and it is safe to go back in?

The area is not reopened until the independent consultant's clearance air sampling passes. The independent consultant also completes the required visual inspection and documents clearance before the affected area is released. Containment only comes down after these steps are completed.

17. Where does the waste go?

Removed asbestos building materials and debris is double-bagged, sealed and labeled. The debris is then transported by an approved transporter and sent to landfills specifically certified for asbestos waste. EH&S reviews the landfill requirements and signs off on the waste manifest.

18. What if I see damaged material, or something that looks wrong near the containment?

Stay away from it and report it to EH&S right away (626-395-6727). Do not touch or clean up suspected material yourself.

19. Who can I contact with additional questions?

Caltech EH&S at 626-395-6727 or safety@caltech.edu.