

FIRE FIGHTERS GUIDANCE NOTE # 3-2

ISSUE: ASBESTOS

Asbestos is a generic term for a group of naturally occurring mineral fibres known for their strength, flame and heat resistance. Harmful asbestos fibres are so small they are invisible to the naked eye. These small fibres may be carried on the wind for long distances.

Until the mid 70's, asbestos was used in an amazing variety of ways including: boiler and pipe insulation, curtains, plasters, floor tile, wall coverings, electrical insulation, fire proofing of structural members and even in homes in roofing materials, wallboard, refrigerators, paints and insulation. A fire involving an older structure may disturb asbestos fibres and present a hazard to firefighters.

Several diseases are associated with exposure to asbestos. They are asbestosis, mesothelioma, cancer of the lung and other asbestos-related cancers. 20 to 35 years after exposure to asbestos serious, debilitating diseases may occur that often end in death.

To cause disease, asbestos must be inhaled into the lungs. To prevent exposure to asbestos firefighters should:

- wear positive pressure SCBA during fire fighting and overhaul;
- conduct on-site decontamination of firefighters prior to removing SCBA (per the Canadian Association of Fire Chiefs' guideline);
- wet surfaces that contain asbestos to minimize fibre disruption;
- wash contaminated clothing and equipment; and,
- shower upon returning to the station.