

Asbestos discovered within St Ives High School buildings

During planned maintenance over the 2020 summer holidays at St Ives High School, asbestos material was found within the ceiling cavity of Building B. This led to further investigations that confirmed the same material is also in the ceiling cavity of buildings A and D.

This material was hidden and previously unknown. It is likely that it was used during the original construction of these buildings in the early 1960s as a fire retardant on the purlins (roof support structures). Work is being planned to remediate these roof spaces.

While this material was generally undisturbed and encapsulated by the ceiling, very small traces of asbestos was recently found in some spaces in buildings A, B, and D. These areas were cleaned and clearance provided by an independent occupational hygienist confirming the buildings are safe to occupy.

Over the past few weeks School Infrastructure NSW and St Ives High School have distributed two notifications and a mention in the weekly school newsletter, and hosted two information sessions so the school community can learn more and ask questions. Another information session is planned for 27 February.

What does this mean for staff and students?

We recognise that the presence of asbestos can be concerning for people, however air monitoring and advice from the independent occupational hygienist confirms that the risk of past and current exposure is very low.

Air monitoring was conducted throughout the work and is ongoing across the school. Results continue to show that the levels of airborne asbestos fibres were below the minimum detection limit and consistent with ambient air. This means there was a low or negligible risk of exposure to airborne hazardous material.

A risk assessment was completed by the independent occupational hygienist who confirmed that, based on the information available, the risk of past exposure at St Ives High School was low or negligible. People who have suffered health effects from exposure have generally worked in either asbestos mining or milling or worked in industries involved in making or installing asbestos products. In all of these situations there was regular exposure to high levels of airborne dust. This is not the case at St Ives High School.

It is important to understand the factors that make asbestos a risk to human health. The average person breathes in 5,500 fibres per day (assuming 20 hours/day indoors). Asbestos fibres are widely present in the built and natural environment and as such no location, including schools, shopping centres or homes can be completely free of asbestos fibres. Despite this, the general population does not contract asbestos related diseases in significant numbers.

Environmental weathering of asbestos-cement sheets in roofing and wall cladding, and disturbance of asbestos from building materials like insulation, ceiling and floor tiles results in asbestos fibres being widespread in the environment.

It is important to note that while the loose fibre bundles found in the samples at St Ives High School cannot be seen with the naked eye, these bundles are still too large to be 'respirable' – this means they are more likely to be 'trapped' by the bodies' defence mechanisms and are unlikely to travel deep into the lungs.

What can you do if you are concerned about exposure?

This has been reported to the Department's Incident Report and Support Hotline, which is available to provide appropriate support and advice regarding potential exposure to asbestos. If current or past employees and students of St Ives High School have any concerns, they can call the Hotline on 1800 811 523 quoting the reference S-2020-170326.

Concerned individuals can also record their details on the National Asbestos Exposure Register (NAER). The NAER is managed by the Australian Government's Asbestos Safety and Eradication Agency, which was created so that members of the community who think that they may have been exposed to asbestos can record the details of their exposure for their future reference. There is no minimum level of exposure required to add your details to the register.

If you have any questions regarding the NAER or would like to speak to someone at the Asbestos Safety and Eradication Agency, please call 1300 326 148.



What are our next steps?

School Infrastructure NSW is now working with staff at St Ives High School to plan remediation work that will have minimal impact to school operations. It is expected that this work could take up to 12 months to complete and there will be some impact to classes, including relocating to additional demountable buildings within school grounds.