

Frequently Asked Questions Hazardous Building Materials

Issue Date: 24 August 2017

What are hazardous building materials?

At RMIT, we define hazardous building materials (**hazmat**) as the following:

- Asbestos-containing materials
- Lead-containing paint
- Ozone depleting substance
- Polychlorinated biphenyls
- Synthetic mineral fibre

Tell me more about them?

Asbestos is the name given to a group of fibrous silicate minerals that occur naturally in the environment. Historically asbestos was used in a wide range of manufactured goods and building materials, mainly for its beneficial properties, including: heat-resistance, electrical insulation, chemical retardant linings, friction products and waterproofing. The importation, installation and new use of asbestos has been banned in Australia since 31 December 2003.

Synthetic mineral fibre (SMF), or man-made mineral fibres (MMMMF) are generic terms used to collectively describe materials such as glassfibre, mineral wool and ceramic fibre. Commonly used as sound or thermal insulation and have been in use for many decades. In Australia, SMF use and removal is governed by the National Occupational Health and Safety Commission, National Code of Practice for the Safe use of Synthetic Mineral Fibres [NOHSC:2006(1990)].

Polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) are commonly found as electrical insulators, in fluorescent light fittings manufactured prior to 1980 in Australia. Electrical capacitors (approx. size-C battery) inside these fittings may contain small amounts of PCBs.

Lead paint systems, lead has historically been a constituent of paint used on walls, ceilings, doors, architraves, building externals etc. In Australia the use of lead in paints has been phased out from the 1950s, with most paints manufactured onshore from 1970s onwards containing less than 1% lead.

Ozone Depleting Substances (ODS) are substances which deplete the ozone layer and are widely used in refrigerators, air conditioners, fire extinguishers, dry cleaning solvents, electrical equipment and agricultural fumigants. The Montreal Protocol sets out a mandatory timetable for the phase out of ODS.

What does hazmat look like?



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Where might hazardous building materials be found in Australia?

As outlined above, differing types of hazmat have differing uses and benefits, however all were considered to have a positive use at some point in time. As such, hazmat has been added to a multitude of building materials and products over the years. Most of the above (asbestos, lead paint, PCBs) have been banned or had their use severely restricted in Australia for many years. ODS has a phase out timeline in place in Australia. SMF is still commonly used in domestic and commercial premises across Australia but has a clear and concise Code of Practice for its use.

Should I be concerned about hazmat being present in my home or workplace?

Our home and workplaces have many items and materials built into them that may present as a 'hazard' if not managed appropriately, e.g. live electrics, trips from cabling, hot water systems etc., to name a few. Factors that we can influence, is how we interact with these hazards to control potential exposure of ourselves and others to potential risk to health or safety.

Factors such as: the type of hazmat materials; condition of the materials; and likelihood of disturbance, can all influence the risk that hazmat may pose to building occupants. In summary hazardous building materials in good condition; and managed appropriately, result in safe and healthy living and working environment.



Figure 2: Risk assessment of hazardous building materials

Should I be concerned about my potential exposure to hazmat?

Hazmat such as asbestos and lead paint, are only a risk to health if they are degraded and disturbed in a manner that releases dusts containing fibres or particulates, and the dust can be breathed in. The weight of scientific evidence is now indicating that it is the inhalation of **significant** quantities of **airborne** asbestos that could lead to disease.

In Australia there are strict Legislative requirements governing the safe management, removal and handling of materials such as asbestos and lead. Current standards and guidelines are designed to protect workers who regularly perform work on or close to these materials. These criteria have in-built safety margins, to ensure the protection of these workers who regularly disturb materials in the course of their works, and as such are even more prudent when considering protection of populations living and working in and around these materials.

Where hazmat is present in buildings and in good condition, such as bonded asbestos materials or lead containing paint to walls and ceilings; it may sometimes be safer to manage these materials in situ, rather than introducing risks of disturbing the materials to facilitate removal. RMIT protocols are set up to consider opportunities to remove hazmat as and when upgrade or refurbishment works are planned.

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How does RMIT manage hazmat?

RMIT is committed to ensuring the health safety and wellbeing of all people who enter, work or study on our campuses. To this end the safety of our students, staff, visitors and contractors is paramount at RMIT. As such we have safe system of works in place at several levels of the organisation, including HR: Health Safety & Wellbeing team, Property Services, School/College etc. This includes regularly reviews and risk assessment of our buildings, working environments and operations.

Property Services maintains an ISO9001 certified Quality Management System (QMS), which includes a comprehensive hazardous building materials management plan, which outlines the safe systems of work in place across RMIT portfolio. The plan takes a best practice approach, considering the hierarchy of control in the proactive safe management of in-situ hazardous materials including asbestos and lead paint.

The management plan stipulates how RMIT maintains 'live' hazmat registers for all RMIT occupied buildings. These registers are frequently reviewed and updated, as well as being made available, in a timely manner to all necessary persons conducting on, or to RMIT infrastructure. The management plan includes also includes the use of a hazmat permit to work system and several communication strategies appropriate for the stakeholder: training and information to contractors, via inductions; consultation with staff including Health and Safety Representatives and Committees volunteer networks; communications to all buildings users, if and when routine hazmat work are in play.

Asbestos safety requirements are clearly stipulated in the OHS Regulations. RMIT takes this further by rating compliance of our activities with the Property Services QMS, which is independently reviewed by a third party, as well as having regular communications with and satisfactory review by Worksafe Victoria.

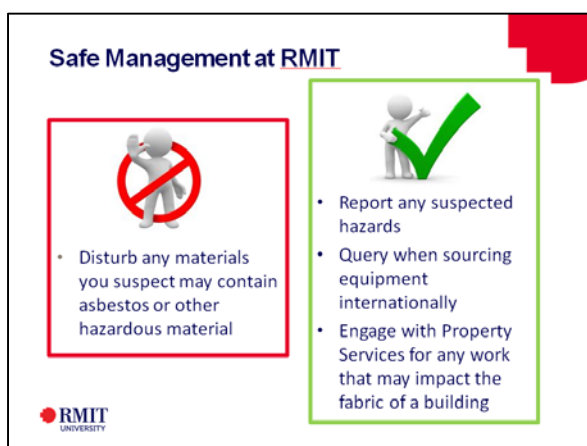


Figure 3: Safe management of hazmat at RMIT

Where can I find more information on hazmat?

- Worksafe Victoria: <https://www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/safety/topics/asbestos>
- Collaboration between EPA, Vic Dept of Health and Worksafe: <http://www.asbestos.vic.gov.au/>
- RMIT Health Safety & Wellbeing Webpage: <http://www1.rmit.edu.au/HSW>
- RMIT Property Services Webpage: <http://www1.rmit.edu.au/propertyservices>

If you have any questions or concerns contact your local Health and Safety Representative (HSR) or HR Assist on hr.assist@rmit.edu.au