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What is asbestos?
Asbestos is a general term for several kinds of natural mineral fibers that have been used to strengthen fireproof materials for nearly 4,000 years. The fibers are recovered from asbestos ore mined primarily in Russia, and South Africa. In addition to being good insulators, asbestos fibers are strong, flexible, fireproof, and very resistant to chemical attack.

What products contain asbestos?
Asbestos is found in a wide a variety of products. It has been used to manufacture nearly 3,500 products such as pipe insulation, boiler covering, sprayed-on acoustical plaster, vinyl floor products, rigid siding, cement pipe, gaskets, paints, paper, textiles, and friction materials like disc brakes. Buildings constructed before 1980 are very likely to contain some asbestos products.

Is asbestos a health or environmental problem?
The presence of asbestos in such a wide variety of consumer products means that most Americans have been exposed, over time, to this mineral to one degree or another.

For the vast majority of Americans who have never worked with asbestos, the exposure received in their lifetime should have no significant health effects. However, for those exposed to large amounts of asbestos for significant periods of time, there may be serious health consequences.

Prolonged high exposure to asbestos fibers has been shown to cause asbestosis (lung scarring), lung cancer, mesothelioma, and several internal cancers such as cancers of the stomach and larynx. People who have been exposed to asbestos who also smoke have a much greater chance of disease than nonsmokers.

Is all asbestos potentially dangerous?
Asbestos products are potentially dangerous if they release asbestos fibers to the air where the fibers can enter the body through the lungs.

Friable asbestos, such as pipe and boiler covering and spray-on insulation, is the asbestos of primary concern. It easily releases asbestos fibers into the air when crushed, handled or disturbed. Asbestos that is in good condition or in a form that does not easily release fibers is much less of a hazard. This means that well-maintained asbestos or asbestos tightly bound into materials like vinyl or cement is much less likely to release asbestos fibers.

What are the laws regarding asbestos?
In Maine, the asbestos regulations apply to any work that impacts greater than 3 square feet or 3 linear feet of asbestos. The Maine "Asbestos Management Regulations" require that the Department be notified prior to removal or repair of asbestos that companies performing inspection, monitoring, design, training, asbestos analysis or abatement be licensed with the Department, and that certain work practices be followed to protect employees and the public. Also, individuals working for the licensed companies must be trained and certified with the Department.

Engineering controls, such as polyethylene "containments", negative pressure ventilation, and wet methods, are basic requirements in the asbestos regulations of both the Maine DEP and the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA). Engineering controls minimize the potential for asbestos fiber release in and out of the asbestos work area. The importance of utilizing proper engineering controls on an asbestos project can not be overemphasized.

Maximum allowable employee exposures are regulated by OSHA and personal protective equipment (suits, respirators, etc.) and hygiene standards are prescribed. Protective equipment is to be used only in conjunction with engineering controls and not as a "stand-alone" defense against inhalation of asbestos fibers.

Who regulates asbestos?
Several state and federal agencies regulate asbestos in Maine including:

- Maine Department of Environmental Protection (DEP): Primary asbestos contact in Maine. Responsibilities include regulating licensing, notification, training, storage, transportation, disposal and work practices for removal, inspection, design, monitoring, and analysis of asbestos. Telephone number: 287-2651.