



Tradespeople Asbestos Awareness Survey



February 2008

- 020 7688 5564
- press@blf-uk.org
- www.lunguk.org



BRITISH LUNG FOUNDATION

Contents

Introduction	Page 3
Executive summary	Page 4
Survey methodology	Page 8
Key findings	Page 10
Detailed findings	Page 12
1. All tradespeople	Page 12
2. Findings by trade	Page 14
3. Findings by employer type	Page 16
4. Findings by region	Page 17
5. Findings by age	Page 19
Other findings	Page 20
Conclusion & recommendations	Page 21

Introduction

Mesothelioma is a chest cancer caused by exposure to asbestos, which kills one person every five hours in the UK. In 2006 the British Lung Foundation joined together with asbestos support groups, mesothelioma charities, healthcare professionals and families bereaved by the disease to campaign on issues that have an impact on people affected by mesothelioma. To mark the first Action Mesothelioma Day on February 27 2006 a 15 point Mesothelioma Charter, which outlined the changes and improvements in policy needed, was presented to 10 Downing Street with more than 14,000 signatures.

One of those fifteen points is to prevent further exposure to asbestos, which the British Lung Foundation hopes to achieve by raising awareness about the material's dangers among the most at-risk groups. Initially, mesothelioma mainly affected people such as ladders, thermal insulation engineers, shipyard workers, asbestos manufacturing workers and women who assembled asbestos-containing gas masks during the war. More recent cases however show that today, those most at risk of contracting the disease are tradespeople such as builders, carpenters, electricians, gas-fitters and plumbers.

Although asbestos exposure is Britain's biggest workplace killer, anecdotal and qualitative evidence suggests tradespeople know very little about asbestos beyond the simple fact that it is dangerous and possibly even less about mesothelioma itself. The British Lung Foundation therefore decided to carry out a quantitative survey in order to identify knowledge gaps more clearly.

Findings from the asbestos awareness survey are being published to mark Action Mesothelioma Day 2008.

Executive Summary

Mesothelioma is a chest cancer caused by asbestos, which kills one person every five hours in the UK. No one has yet survived being diagnosed with mesothelioma.

Cases of mesothelioma are set to peak between 2011 and 2015. Those most at risk of contracting the disease are tradespeople such as builders, carpenters, electricians, gas-fitters and plumbers. Asbestos was used in UK construction up until the mid 1980s and the Health and Safety Executive warns that any building built before 2000 could contain asbestos.

Anecdotal and qualitative evidence suggests tradespeople know very little about asbestos, beyond the simple fact that it is dangerous, and possibly even less about mesothelioma itself.

To explore this further, the BLF commissioned a survey of 399 tradespeople in January 2008. Respondents were made up of plumbers, builders, carpenters, electricians, joiners and gas fitters of varying ages.

The results show that a third of tradespeople admit to not being well informed about asbestos. Three in ten also incorrectly believe that most asbestos has now been removed from UK buildings.

Most of those surveyed (82%) give asbestos a danger rating of 8 out of 10 or higher, but less than a third know exposure to asbestos can cause cancer and almost nine out of ten are unaware exposure can be fatal. Three quarters of respondents have not received any formal training. Of those who have received training, nearly half say it took place more than six years ago.

More than half of tradespeople never ask if the site they are working on has been checked for asbestos before they start the job and a further 28% only ask rarely or sometimes.

One in ten tradespeople say they have felt under pressure to continue working even if they thought asbestos was present.

Builders are most likely to consider themselves well informed about asbestos but are also the most likely to underestimate the dangers of it. Nearly one in five (18%) think asbestos is no longer a serious issue and more than a third (34%) mistakenly believe most asbestos has been removed.

Electricians are more likely than any other trade to describe themselves as not well informed about asbestos but are least likely to dismiss it as no longer a serious issue.

Carpenters are less likely to have had formal training in how to deal with asbestos than any other trade. Whereas nearly two fifths of gasfitters (39%) and almost a third of plumbers (30%) say they have had training, this is the case for just 15% of carpenters.

Gasfitters are more likely to make mistakes when identifying asbestos than any other trade despite the fact that they are most likely to have had training in how to deal with asbestos. Nearly one in five gasfitters (19%) would scrape material in order to identify it even though this is the most dangerous way to proceed as damaging asbestos-containing materials releases harmful fibres into the air.

Tradespeople working solely in domestic properties are more likely to consider themselves not very well informed, or not at all informed,

about asbestos compared to those working in both domestic and commercial environments.

Sole traders or contractors are less likely to consider themselves well informed about asbestos than those working for an employer. They are more likely to incorrectly believe that most asbestos has been removed and less likely to have had training in how to deal with asbestos.

One in five (20%) tradespeople in the North think asbestos is no longer a serious issue compared to just 8% in the South.

Tradespeople in the Midlands are the most likely to say they have felt under pressure to keep working even when they have suspected the presence of asbestos - 14% said they felt this way compared to 8% in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Tradespeople aged over 55 consider themselves better informed about asbestos than their younger colleagues. Those over 55 are however also the most likely to dismiss asbestos as no longer being a serious issue. Sixteen percent of the over 55s say this compared to 10% of the 35-44 year-olds.

The British Lung Foundation is calling on tradespeople to keep themselves informed and up to date about the dangers of asbestos and to follow HSE guidance on all aspects of dealing with the material. The British Lung Foundation is calling on the Department for Work and Pensions to fund increased awareness campaigns to ensure more tradespeople are aware of the dangers of asbestos.

Particular focus in future should be given to those tradespeople who show the most worrying knowledge gaps - ie sole traders working in domestic properties; gasfitters and carpenters.

DIY outlets and builders merchants should support asbestos awareness campaigns by displaying information materials and ensuring that their own information and advice includes guidance on asbestos.

About Mesothelioma

Mesothelioma is a type of cancer, which mainly affects the lining of the lungs ('the pleura') in the chest.

Asbestos is the cause of over 90% of cases of mesothelioma. Smoking does not cause the disease and neither does exposure to modern fire-resistant materials (like fibreglass). All types of asbestos can cause mesothelioma if it is breathed in or the fibres are swallowed. Blue and brown asbestos are known to be the most dangerous. White asbestos does increase the risk of mesothelioma but is not as strong. Another fibre called tremolite may also be a cause.

Mesothelioma is one of the most difficult diseases that people, their doctors, friends and families have to face. There is no cure for mesothelioma at the moment.

There are about 1,800 new cases of mesothelioma a year in the UK. The numbers are increasing and are expected to peak between 2011 and 2015. It is thought that up to 30,000 people will die of the disease in the UK between 2006 and 2020.

Survey Methodology

The British Lung Foundation commissioned The Murray Consultancy Ltd to carry out an asbestos awareness survey of tradespeople across the UK in January 2008. Interviews with 399 people were carried out by a specialist telephone research team between 2 January and 18 January.

The 399 respondents were made up of the following:

Type of trade:

- Plumbers: 26%
- Builders: 20%
- Carpenters: 20%
- Electricians: 15%
- Joiners: 14%
- Gas fitters: 10%
- Other: 3%

(Some listed themselves in more than one category).

Age range:

- Under 25: 3%
- 25-34: 12%
- 35-44: 30%
- 45-54: 28%
- 55+: 26%
- No answer: 1%

Employment type:

- Sole traders or contractors: 62%
- Small companies with up to 10 staff: 32%
- Medium and Large companies: 5%
- No answer: 1%

Respondents were also asked what type of property they worked on.

- Domestic only: 51%
- Commercial only: 6%
- Both: 43%

A ten percent call back was carried out to ensure interview authenticity. All data was then captured into the Questionnaire Analysis Software Package SNAP. Once all the data had been entered, a ten percent verification process was carried out.

Key Findings

- Less than a third (31%) of tradespeople are aware that asbestos exposure can cause cancer and only 12% know exposure could be fatal
- Almost three quarters (74%) have never received any training on how to deal with asbestos
- One in ten tradespeople (11%) say they have felt under pressure to continue working even if they have suspected asbestos is present
- Four out of five tradespeople (81%) never, rarely or only sometimes ask if the site they are working on has been checked for asbestos before they start the job
- More than a quarter (26%) consider themselves not very well informed about asbestos with a further 8% admitting they are not at all informed
- Almost half (47%) say they or their employers have done nothing to keep them informed about the risks of asbestos and what to do if they encounter it
- Nearly a third (30%) incorrectly believe all asbestos has now been removed
- More than three quarters (78%) of builders say they are well informed about asbestos but are also the most likely to underestimate the dangers of the material. Nearly one in five (18%) think asbestos is no longer a serious issue, and more than a third (34%) mistakenly believe most asbestos has been removed.
- Carpenters are less likely to have had formal training in how to deal with asbestos than any other trade. Just 15% say they have had such training.

- Nearly one in five gasfitters (19%) would scrape material in order to identify asbestos even though this is the most dangerous way to proceed as it releases harmful fibres into the air.
- More than two fifths (42%) of tradespeople working solely on domestic properties say they are not very well informed, or not at all informed, about asbestos compared to 25% of those working in both domestic and commercial environments.
- Almost two fifths (38%) of sole traders or contractors say they are not very well or not at all informed about asbestos compared to a quarter (25%) of those working for an employer. A third (34%) incorrectly believe that most asbestos has been removed compared to 25% of other tradespeople.
- One in five (20%) tradespeople in the North think asbestos is no longer a serious issue compared to just 8% in the South.
- Tradespeople in the Midlands are the most likely to say they have felt under pressure to keep working even when they have suspected the presence of asbestos - 14% said they felt this way compared to 8% in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.
- Tradespeople aged over 55 consider themselves better informed about asbestos than their younger colleagues. Nearly three quarters (72%) of tradespeople who were 55 or older say they are quite well, well or very well informed, compared to 65% of those aged between 45 and 54, 63% of 35-44 year-olds and 65% of those aged between 25 and 34. Those over 55 are however also the most likely to dismiss asbestos as no longer being a serious issue. Sixteen percent of the over 55s say this compared to 10% of the 35-44 year-olds.

Detailed Findings

1. All tradespeople

General knowledge of asbestos

A third (34%) of tradespeople admit to not being well informed about asbestos. A quarter (26%) say they are not very well informed and a further eight percent say they are not at all informed about asbestos.

Three in ten (30%) also incorrectly believe that all asbestos has now been removed from UK buildings. In reality, the Health and Safety Executive warns that any building built before the year 2000 could still contain asbestos as the material was used in construction up until the mid 1980s.

The survey also reveals further misconceptions, with more than a quarter (28%) mistakenly assuming that some levels of asbestos are safe. In fact, there are three types of asbestos - blue, brown and white - and while blue and brown are considered the most dangerous, white asbestos still poses a health risk.

Awareness of health risks posed by asbestos

Tradespeople displayed some interesting contradictions when it came to awareness of the health risks posed by asbestos. Most of those surveyed (82%) give asbestos a danger rating of 8 out of 10 or higher and a similar percentage (80%) consider asbestos to still be a serious issue. Despite that, less than a third (31%) know exposure to asbestos can cause cancer and almost nine out of ten (88%) are unaware exposure can be fatal.

Only four percent of respondents can name mesothelioma as a disease caused by exposure to asbestos and one in five (20%) do not know of any. When prompted as to whether they have heard of a disease called

mesothelioma, 85% said they have not. Of those who have heard of the disease, almost all (97%) do not know it can be fatal.

Training and experience

The tradespeople surveyed have had little training in how to deal with asbestos. A shocking three quarters (74%) of respondents say they have not received any formal training. Of those who have received training, 45% say it took place more than six years ago.

Whilst most (86%) believe they, or their employer, have done enough to make their work environment safe, nearly half (47%) also state that they themselves or their employer have not done anything to keep them informed about the risks of asbestos.

Considering that two thirds (66%) of tradespeople claim to be quite well, well, or very well informed about asbestos, but also bearing in mind that three quarters (74%) have had no formal training, it was interesting to understand the source of their information. The largest proportion (24%) say they learned about asbestos through an informal chat with a colleague. A similar number (22%) say they learned from experience on the job and the third highest category (16%) give health and safety leaflets as their main source of information.

More than three quarters (76%) say guidelines on how to identify and deal with asbestos would be useful.

Asbestos in the workplace

Attitudes towards asbestos affect safety procedures in the workplace, which are vital if tradespeople are to protect themselves against asbestos-related diseases. It is worrying that more than half of tradespeople (53%) never ask if the site they are working on has been checked for asbestos before they start the job and a further 28% only

ask rarely or sometimes. Nearly one in five tradespeople (18%) say they have never thought of asking whether the site has been checked for asbestos, but almost a third (30%) say they do not ask because they know what to look out for.

One in ten tradespeople (11%) say they identify asbestos by scraping or touching an area to reveal its fibres, which is the most dangerous way to proceed. If asbestos containing materials are in good condition it is safer to leave them where they are. Scraping materials releases harmful asbestos fibres into the air where they can be inhaled and exposes the tradesperson to serious health risks.

Advice from the Health and Safety Executive is very clear on asbestos. Tradespeople are urged to stop working and seek advice if they suspect asbestos may be present or if they are in doubt as to whether it could be, but fewer than four in ten tradespeople (38%) surveyed said they would stop working in this situation. Nearly two thirds (64%) said they would report it and get it tested.

Of great concern is the fact that one in ten tradespeople (11%) say they have felt under pressure to continue working even if they thought asbestos was present. The most common explanation seemed to be that they felt the job had to get done or be finished quickly. It is worrying that health risks are considered secondary in these cases.

2. Findings by trade

Builders

Builders are most likely to say they are well informed about asbestos but are also the most likely to underestimate its dangers.

More than three quarters (78%) say they are quite well, well or very well informed compared to 58% of electricians, yet nearly one in five (18%) think asbestos is no longer a serious issue, which is the double the figure for electricians (9%). Additionally, more than a third of builders (34%) mistakenly believe most asbestos has now been removed, whereas less than a quarter of carpenters (23%) think this.

Carpenters

Carpenters are less likely to have had formal training in how to deal with asbestos than any other trade. Whereas nearly two fifths of gasfitters (39%) and almost a third of plumbers (30%) say they have had training, this is the case for just 15% of carpenters. More than two thirds (68%) also admit that they themselves or their employer has done nothing to keep them informed about the risks of asbestos. This is nearly a fifth more than the next highest trade, plumbers, for whom the figure is 50% and more than double the proportion of builders (32%).

Electricians

Electricians are more likely than any other trade to describe themselves as not well informed about asbestos, but least likely to dismiss it as no longer a serious issue. Two fifths (41%) say they are not very well or not at all informed about asbestos, but fewer than one in ten (9%) say it is no longer a serious issue, half the proportion of builders who think this (18%).

Gasfitters

Gasfitters are more likely to make mistakes when identifying asbestos than any other trade despite the fact that they are more likely to have had training in how to deal with asbestos than any other trade.

Nearly two in five (39%) of gasfitters say they have had training in how to deal with asbestos compared to just 15% of carpenters, yet gasfitters are the least likely to ask for a professional test for asbestos to be carried out even though this is the only way to safely identify the material. A tiny 2% of gasfitters would ask for a professional test compared to almost a fifth of builders (17%).

Nearly one in five gasfitters (19%) would scrape material in order to identify it even though this is the most dangerous way to proceed as damaging asbestos-containing materials releases harmful fibres into the air.

Gasfitters are more likely than any other trade to mistakenly think some levels of asbestos are safe. More than a third (38%) of gas fitters believe this in comparison to a quarter of builders (26%).

Plumbers

Plumbers are the least likely to stop working if they encounter asbestos, even though the Health and Safety executive advises any tradesperson who suspects asbestos is present to stop working and get advice. Less than a third of plumbers (30%) say they would stop working compared to almost half (48%) of joiners.

3. Findings by employer type

Sole traders or contractors are less likely to consider themselves well informed about asbestos than those working for an employer and they are right to do so. They are more likely to incorrectly believe that most asbestos has been removed and less likely to have had training in how to deal with asbestos compared to those working for an employer.

Almost two fifths (38%) of sole traders say they are not very well or not at all informed about asbestos, whereas that figure drops to a quarter for other tradespeople. A third (34%) incorrectly believe that most asbestos has been removed whereas only 25% of other tradespeople think this. Only one in five sole traders (20%) had had training in how to deal with asbestos compared to 29% of other tradespeople.

Sole traders are more likely to have felt under pressure to continue working even when they suspect asbestos is present. Thirteen percent of sole traders say they have experienced this, almost double the number of other tradespeople (7%). Similarly, other tradespeople are twice as likely as sole traders to ask whether a site has been checked for asbestos - more than a quarter (26%) of other tradespeople say they always do this, but the figure drops to 13% amongst sole traders.

4. Findings by region

North

One in five (20%) tradespeople in the North think asbestos is no longer a serious issue compared to just 8% in the South. Two fifths (40%) of tradespeople in the North also incorrectly believe most asbestos has been removed compared to just over a quarter (27%) in the South. Tradespeople in the North are most likely to scrape materials in order to identify asbestos, which is the most dangerous way to proceed - 16% of tradespeople in the North say they would do this compared to just 4% in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The North also has the highest proportion of people who get their information about asbestos from an informal chat with a colleague - 33% compared to 13% in Midlands.

Midlands

The only way to safely identify asbestos is to have it professionally tested, yet not a single tradesperson surveyed in the Midlands say they would do this in order to identify asbestos compared to 17% in the North.

The Midlands has the largest proportion of tradespeople (76%) who say they rarely or never ask if a site has been checked for asbestos before they start work, compared to 60% in the North. Tradespeople in the Midlands are also the most likely to say they have felt under pressure to keep working even when they have suspected the presence of asbestos - 14% said they felt this way compared to 8% in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Tradespeople in the Midlands also had the lowest awareness in relation to asbestos and cancer - just 22% of tradespeople in the Midlands knew exposure could cause cancer, compared to a half in the North.

South

The South has the highest proportion of tradespeople saying they are not at all or not very well informed about asbestos - 40% describe themselves in this way compared to 27% in the North. Tradespeople in the South are also the least likely to have had training in how to deal with asbestos - just 16% have had training compared to 31% in the North. Almost two thirds of tradespeople in the South (64%) say they themselves or their employer has done nothing to keep them informed about the risks of asbestos compared to 29% in North. Tradespeople in the South also have the lowest awareness of mesothelioma - just 2% had heard of it compared to 39% in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Tradespeople in the South are the least likely to dismiss asbestos as no longer being a serious issue - fewer than one in ten (8%) say this compared to 20% in the North. Whereas two fifths (40%) of tradespeople in the North incorrectly believe most asbestos has been removed, this figure drops to just over a quarter (27%) in the South. Similarly, tradespeople in the South are least likely to incorrectly believe some levels of asbestos are safe - one in five (21%) believe this in the South compared to nearly two in five (38%) in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland

Tradespeople in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are most likely to incorrectly believe that some levels of asbestos are safe - 38% had this view compared to 21% in the South.

5. Findings by age

Tradespeople aged over 55 consider themselves better informed about asbestos than their younger colleagues. Nearly three quarters (72%) of tradespeople who were 55 or older say they are quite well, well or very well informed, compared to 65% of those aged between 45 and 54, 63% of 35-44 year-olds and 65% of those aged between 25 and 34. Those over 55 are however also the most likely to dismiss asbestos as no longer being a serious issue. Sixteen percent of the over 55s say this compared to 10% of the 35-44 year-olds.

Older tradespeople are more likely to stop working if they encounter asbestos - 41% of those over 55 and 42% of those aged between 45 and 54 say they would do this in contrast to just 31% of those aged between 25 and 34. Similarly, while around a quarter of the over 55s (26%) and those aged 45-54 (22%) incorrectly think some levels of asbestos are safe, this figure rises to a third (34%) among 35-44 year-olds.

All tradespeople, irrespective of age, say they get most of their information from an informal chat with a colleague.

Other findings

Tradespeople working solely in domestic properties are more likely to consider themselves not very well informed, or not at all informed, about asbestos compared to those working in both domestic and commercial environments.

Whereas more than two fifths (42%) of tradespeople working in domestic properties say they are not very well or not at all informed about asbestos, only a quarter of those working in both say this. Similarly, more than half (56%) of tradespeople working only in domestic properties say they themselves or their employer does nothing to keep them informed about the risks of asbestos. Among tradespeople who also work on commercial sites, this drops to less than two fifths (38%).

Not surprisingly perhaps, the majority of tradespeople working solely in domestic properties are also much less likely to ask whether a building has been checked for asbestos before they start work. A quarter of tradespeople working in both commercial and domestic settings say they always ask this question, compared to only one in ten (11%) of those employed solely in domestic properties.

Conclusion and recommendations

1. This survey revealed substantial and worrying knowledge gaps amongst tradespeople in relation to the health risks posed by asbestos. These are of even greater concern because a substantial proportion consider themselves well informed about asbestos or feel certain that they know how to avoid the dangers when the reality for many appears to be the opposite. Tradespeople are clearly more at risk than they think they are.
2. Tradespeople need to be better trained in how to deal with asbestos. The fact that three quarters of those who are most at risk of contracting asbestos-related diseases have had no formal training is unacceptable. Nine out of ten tradespeople are coming into contact with a material without knowing that it could kill them.
3. Asbestos is the greatest cause of work-related deaths in the UK and the country is soon to face a mesothelioma epidemic as cases peak between 2011 and 2015. Awareness of the dangers posed by asbestos needs to rise dramatically if mesothelioma is to become a disease of the past. The British Lung Foundation now urges all stakeholders to work together in order to reach that goal.
4. Tradespeople should take responsibility for keeping themselves informed and up to date about the dangers of asbestos and follow HSE guidance on all aspects of dealing with the material. They should also understand their own responsibilities towards protecting clients from asbestos exposure.
5. The Department for Work and Pensions should fund increased asbestos awareness campaigns to address current knowledge gaps

and to ensure more tradespeople are aware of the dangers of asbestos.

6. Particular focus in future awareness campaigns should be given to those tradespeople who show the most worrying knowledge gaps - ie sole traders working in domestic properties; builders, gasfitters and carpenters.
7. DIY outlets and builders merchants should support asbestos awareness campaigns by displaying information materials and ensuring that their own information and advice includes guidance on asbestos.

Supported by:

