

Safety Alert

Concrete Spacer Block

Asbestos

09 January 2023

Background information

To correctly position steel reinforcement, in reinforced concrete, concrete spacer blocks have been used since the early 1960's. Today more modern plastic spacers are available, but in the past other materials were also used.

A recent investigation of a concrete bridge deck identified a 'concrete' reinforcement spacer block with traces of white fibres. The sample was tested and confirmed the presence of a small amount of white asbestos fibres in a cement matrix.

Blue (crocidolite) and brown (amosite) asbestos were banned by law in 1985. White (Chrysotile) was also banned in 1999 by The Asbestos (Prohibitions) (Amendment) Regulations in 1999. Amosite and crocidolite are considered the most hazardous asbestos fibre types; however, all types can present a risk to human health.



Lessons Learnt

- Hard concrete spacer blocks used prior to 1999, may contain up to 5% white asbestos fibres and are classed as an asbestos cement product.

Structure records are unlikely to have details of the manufacturer, type, and location of the spacers. Their positioning will not be obvious and they can be difficult to locate.

All concrete removal activities involving structures built prior to 1999, must assume the potential presence of asbestos fibres in asbestos cement spacer blocks. Such works are classified by the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) as non-licensed works.





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- HSE guidance is that the health risks from asbestos cement spacer blocks are extremely low, and activities such as inspection, maintenance and concrete repairs are not defined as work with asbestos. Normal good practices such as dust suppression and prewetting of concrete surfaces during mechanical concrete removal are sufficient to minimise risks.
- Concrete demolition waste can be crushed and recycled but should be kept damp. If asbestos cement spacers are found during works, they should be identified with paint. Workers undertaking work which would involve disturbing reinforced concrete should follow appropriate guidance regarding PPE.

National Highways requirements about asbestos is provided by GG105 Asbestos Management - (<https://www.standardsforhighways.co.uk/prod/attachments/9f7803ca-26aa-49bd-98f8-c514ab051040?inline=true>)

Health and Safety Executive (HSE) essential guidance for Asbestos – (<https://www.hse.gov.uk/asbestos/essentials/index.htm>) and the Approved Code of Practice for Managing and Working with Asbestos - <https://www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/priced/l143.pdf> which expands on the working with non-licensed works.

If you have any queries about this safety alert information announcement, then please contact Leventia.Stoiou@nationalhighways.co.uk or HealthSafety&Wellbeingteam@nationalhighways.co.uk