

PRESS RELEASE

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## Asbestos: Council and Parliament strike deal on new rules protecting workers

The Council has reached a provisional agreement with the European Parliament on a new law to **strengthen the protection of workers** from the risks of **exposure to asbestos**.

The new rules **significantly reduce the current asbestos limits** and provide for **more accurate ways to measure exposure levels**, in line with the latest technological developments.

Asbestos exposure is still one of the most dangerous health risks facing many EU citizens in the workplace. Today's agreement brings the rules on exposure limits in line with advances in measuring methods, meaning that workers will benefit from much higher levels of protection.

*Paulina Brandberg, Swedish Minister for Gender Equality and Working Life*

### A lower exposure limit

Despite being banned in the EU nearly two decades ago, asbestos still poses a threat to workers' health due to its presence in older buildings. The new rules agreed upon today will initially reduce the maximum limit for exposure to **0.01 fibres of asbestos per cm<sup>3</sup>**, which is ten times lower than the current limit of 0.1 f/cm<sup>3</sup>.

Following a maximum **transition period of 6 years**, member states will be required to implement a new method for measuring asbestos levels, **electron microscopy (EM)**, which is more sensitive than the phase-contrast microscopy (PCM) currently used and makes it possible to **measure thin asbestos fibres**. Having introduced EM, member states will have two options:

- to measure thin asbestos fibres, in which case the maximum exposure limit will remain at **0.01 f/cm<sup>3</sup>**
- not to measure thin asbestos fibres, in which case the maximum exposure limit will be reduced to **0.002 f/cm<sup>3</sup>**

### Strengthened preventive and protective measures

Under the new rules, undertakings that intend to carry out demolition or asbestos removal work will be required to obtain permits from national authorities. Employers will also need to take steps to **identify materials that could potentially contain asbestos** before beginning demolition or maintenance work on premises built before the entry into force of the national asbestos ban. They may do this, for instance, by obtaining information from the building's owners or other employers, or by consulting other relevant sources of information such as registers.

Workers who are or may be exposed to asbestos should wear suitable personal protective equipment and undergo compulsory training, in line with minimum quality requirements set out in the directive.

### Public registers

Member states shall keep a register of all cases of medically diagnosed asbestos-related occupational diseases.

### Helping to beat cancer

The provisions agreed upon today will help prevent cases of work-related cancer, in line with **Europe's Beating Cancer Plan**. If inhaled, airborne asbestos fibres can cause serious diseases such as lung cancer, the first signs of which may take many decades to appear.

## Next steps

Member states' ambassadors to the EU will be asked to approve the agreement reached with the Parliament at an upcoming meeting of the Permanent Representatives Committee. The text of the directive will then undergo legal and linguistic revision before being adopted by ministers at a forthcoming Council meeting. Once adopted, member states will have two years to introduce the new maximum exposure level of  $0.01 \text{ f/cm}^3$  and six years to introduce EM to measure asbestos levels in the workplace.

In order to keep up with scientific and technological progress, the directive will be regularly updated.

## Background

Although asbestos has been banned in the EU since 2005, it is present in older buildings. It therefore poses a particular threat to health threat during building renovations, when materials containing asbestos are disturbed and workers inhale the fibres that are released. As many as 78% of occupational cancers may be related to asbestos exposure.

On 28 September 2022, the Commission published a proposal to revise the legislation on asbestos exposure in the workplace as part of a package aimed at ensuring an asbestos-free future for EU citizens.

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