

Asbestos in Gauzes

The Health and Safety Executive (HSE) has issued a warning that metal gauzes containing asbestos have been supplied to UK schools via two suppliers. These are items used with Bunsen burners in science experiments.

At the moment, the HSE has not named the suppliers in question.

CLEAPSS and the HSE have issued guidance on how schools should respond to the issue (at <http://science.cleapss.org.uk/Resource/GL286-FAQs-regarding-asbestos-in-gauzes.pdf> and <http://science.cleapss.org.uk/Resource/HSE-ADVICE-TO-USERS-OF-BUNSEN-BURNER-WIRE-GAUZES-THAT-MAY-CONTAIN-ASBESTOS.pdf>) which is available to all schools, regardless of membership.

Although CLEAPSS does not operate in Scotland, the Scottish Schools Education Research Centre (SSERC) has only issued basic guidance. Therefore, the NASUWT strongly recommends schools in Scotland to follow CLEAPSS advice in this instance. Likewise, the Health and Safety Executive for Northern Ireland (HSENI) has not issued guidance, so schools in Northern Ireland should follow HSE advice. Schools in Jersey, Guernsey, Gibraltar and the Isle of Man should also follow CLEAPSS advice.

The NASUWT recommends that headteachers/principals should take the following actions:

- Ensure the Head of the Science Department is aware of both the HSE and CLEAPSS guidance.
- Any gauze purchased after 1976 should be considered suspect unless the supplier can provide the certificate from a **UK-based, UK Accreditation Service (UKAS) accredited testing organisation** that the gauzes are free of asbestos.
- Suspect gauzes must not be used.
- Teachers must not be required to carry out the removal of suspect gauzes, and should only do so if they are competent. In line with CLEAPSS advice, if there are no competent person(s) on site, then a specialist asbestos removals contractor should be used.
- If there are competent person(s) available, the gauzes stored in a container should be disposed of in the container, where possible, to prevent further handling of individual gauzes. The container and gauzes should be treated as asbestos-containing waste. Where this is not possible, the gauzes should be carefully wetted using a hand-held spray bottle containing water with a small quantity of detergent (e.g. washing-up liquid) and handled carefully to prevent any further damage. Any areas where they have been stored, and any equipment they have been stored with, should be cleaned following HSE guidelines.
- The gauzes must be disposed of as hazardous waste, as should any materials used to clean areas/equipment that could be contaminated.

Continued overleaf

When purchasing replacement gauzes, schools should seek confirmation from suppliers that the supply chain is assured and that new gauzes do not contain any level of asbestos. The only certain way of ensuring this is for items originating outside the EU to be analysed by a laboratory accredited for asbestos identification by the UKAS. Schools should seek a copy of a valid UKAS test certificate for the gauze from the supplier.

The NASUWT has written to Ministers across the UK drawing their attention to the seriousness of this situation and asking them to provide urgent support and advice to schools, including taking account of the costs schools may incur when engaging specialist disposal of the asbestos.

The Union has also asked that the names of the suppliers are released immediately, which would enable schools to identify immediately if they have used those suppliers and reassure their pupils, parents and staff that either there are no issues in the school or that actions are being taken.

The NASUWT should be contacted without delay if further advice is needed. If any teachers have been exposed to asbestos, they should log this with their GP at the earliest opportunity. NASUWT members also have access to the NASUWT register, which is maintained by Thompsons Solicitors. Thompsons can be contacted on 0808 100 2221 and they should log their exposure on this.



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0131 226 8480

E-mail: rc-scotland@mail.nasuwt.org.uk

Website: www.nasuwt.org.uk

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