

# Limiting Exposure to Asbestos After a Disaster

**By Rosie Rosati**, contributor to *In Public Safety*

Areas ravaged by environmental disasters fight an uphill battle during the [recovery process](#), and the presence of asbestos can complicate matters further. From the tragic events of 9/11 to Hurricane Katrina and Superstorm Sandy, there are lessons to be learned from how toxic substances are handled in the aftermath of a disaster.

Due to our history with asbestos throughout these major national events, we now understand the importance of encouraging and promoting occupational health and safety among rescue and first response crews. By keeping the past in mind, first responders and emergency management can be better [prepared for recovery](#) following a disastrous event and learn how to best handle the removal of asbestos debris.

## What is Asbestos?

Asbestos is a microscopic and carcinogenic fiber that was commonly used in building materials through the 1970s. While it is now strictly regulated in the United States, the toxin can still be found in older homes, thus complicating the rebuilding process after a disastrous event. When materials containing asbestos are disturbed, toxic dust may be inhaled and become embedded in the lining of organs, where it can [develop into mesothelioma cancer](#).

The importance of [preventative measures](#) may be lost on some individuals because, with the 10 to 50 year latency period of mesothelioma and other asbestos-related health issues, consequences are not immediate. Emergency managers must recognize health concerns and ensure the removal and disposal of asbestos is highly regulated and limited to abatement professionals who have the proper gear and qualifications.

## Protecting Our Heroes

Although removing asbestos requires a trained specialist, environmental disasters leave very little time to prepare first responders for potential exposure. This is almost entirely due to the presence of asbestos within older structures, as any form of damage can result in toxic debris and airborne asbestos fibers spreading for miles. This can put EMTs, firefighters, law enforcement, demolition crews, and anyone else who has volunteered to help relieve local devastation at significant risk of developing an asbestos-related illness years later.

Currently, [65,000 rescue workers](#) who responded to 9/11 are being monitored by the World Trade Center Health Program (WTCHP), and 43 percent of them have been diagnosed with a chronic condition resulting from toxic exposure. In addition, the rate of cancer among firefighters who infiltrated Ground Zero is 20 percent higher than those who were not exposed. The incident has shed light on the important issue of how to protect first responders from toxic exposure, as these brave and honorable individuals are now suffering from lifelong diseases.

## Asbestos and Hurricane Katrina

Following Hurricane Katrina in 2005, decisions were made to speed up the recovery process, but that unfortunately created debris management issues. In an effort to expedite the cleanup, the Environmental Protection Agency temporarily issued "[No Action Assurances](#)" in regard to the Clean Air Act, which meant buildings were no longer required to be inspected for asbestos prior to deconstruction. Later, the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality found [the majority of land tracts within the area contained homes built before 1980](#), when the use of asbestos products was widespread. This means hundreds of citizens may have been exposed to the toxin.

To compensate for bypassing deconstruction regulations, it would have been wise to install additional air monitoring in high-demolition neighborhoods to ensure the amount of asbestos dust was not over the legal limit. Unfortunately, no such system was put into place and air quality monitors were reduced to pre-storm quantities just one year later, even though demolition was still ongoing. While eliminating the need for inspections was a quick fix, it may have created a slow burning problem in the form of causing cancer. Since mesothelioma develops over decades, it was a terrible reminder for those trying to put the trauma of Hurricane Katrina in the past.

## Asbestos and Superstorm Sandy

Superstorm Sandy first responders were able to look at the response following Hurricane Katrina and improve upon it. New York did three things correctly in the aftermath of Sandy pertaining to limiting asbestos exposure: they installed additional air quality monitors, enforced asbestos inspections before demolition, and provided grant assistance for its removal.

As a preventative measure, New York City stepped up the number of [air quality monitors in the hardest hit areas](#) to produce almost real-time data that was publicly accessible. The amount of asbestos in the air never rose above what is typical for that time of year. If such an increase had occurred, the monitoring would have triggered swift actions to protect citizens and limit exposure. The city also monitored debris piles for asbestos so it could be disposed of properly.

While Louisiana allowed shortcuts to be taken, New York [incentivized following all asbestos regulations](#). The state employed a grant program that reimbursed homeowners for removal costs, one that reached upwards of \$2,000 out-of-pocket. To receive the grant money, homeowners had to submit proof that their homes had been inspected.

## Safety Management and Moving Forward

After a disastrous event, it's important to rebuild neighborhoods and return citizens to their normal lives as soon as possible, but practices must be enforced to protect first responders and families in hard hit areas from surging cancer rates in decades to come. [The EPA provides guidelines](#) for workers that recommend the safest way to handle debris containing asbestos and ensure their lungs are safe from exposure.

Officials must look at the average age of homes in a city impacted by a natural or environmental disaster and make the best decisions based on that situation. The best thing to come from failures is what we learn from them. It seems New York did just that while rebuilding after Sandy, and the hope is that any city hit by a catastrophic event will do the same.

**About the Author:** *Rosie Rosati is the Health Advocate for mesothelioma patients at the Mesothelioma and Asbestos Awareness Center. She specializes in asbestos use around the world and is dedicated to building awareness about mesothelioma and connecting those affected and most vulnerable with the resources they need. To contact the author, email [IPSauthor@apus.edu](mailto:IPSauthor@apus.edu). For more articles featuring insight from industry experts, subscribe to [In Public Safety's bi-monthly newsletter](#).*