



SPEAKING NOTES ON ASBESTOS-CEMENT WATER PIPES

Revised February 2026

CWWA created these speaking notes to help municipal water officials brief their Councils and other stakeholders on the topic of asbestos-cement water pipes. While there is an abundance of information available on the internet, CWWA believes that the following are credible sources of science-based information and should be considered.

What is Asbestos and Why is it Used in Asbestos-Cement Water Pipes?

Asbestos is a group of naturally occurring silicate minerals made up of fine, durable fibres that are resistant to heat, fire, and chemicals and do not conduct electricity. Due to its fibrous properties, asbestos has been widely used, throughout much of the 20th century, in a variety of building construction materials (e.g., insulation, fire retardant) and manufactured goods (e.g., roofing shingles, tiles, asbestos cement).



Asbestos cement (A-C) pipe was widely used by water utilities for water conveyance pipes for a brief period during the 1940's through to the 1960's due to its low cost, durability, resistance to corrosion, and lightweight nature. A-C pipe is no longer installed and has not been installed in municipal water systems for many years. While there is not an aggressive plan to seek out and remove A-C pipe, it is recommended, and is a generally accepted practice, that A-C pipe be removed and replaced during any construction that exposes such pipe.

Health Risks Associated with Asbestos in Drinking Water

It is well documented that asbestos is hazardous when fibres are airborne and inhaled - asbestos is a known carcinogen through the inhalation route. However, oral exposure to asbestos, such as consumption of drinking water, has not been shown to cause adverse effects in humans or animals. This is supported by Health Canada and the World Health Organization. Regardless of that research, the risk from drinking water via A-C pipes is low because:

- Although the data are limited, there is a very low detection frequency of asbestos fibre in drinking water
- Any asbestos fibres present in drinking water are generally smaller (less than 1 μm) than those associated with adverse health effects in humans
- Any small fibres present in drinking water are further degraded in the stomach and excreted after they are ingested

The Scientific Research

Health Canada and the World Health Organization have concluded that **there is no consistent, convincing evidence that asbestos ingested through water is harmful to your health.** They also state that the risk of exposure to airborne asbestos from tap water is very low. Their research has shown very low percentages of asbestos fibers transferring into the air from humidifiers or showers. Additionally, these fibers would be smaller than those considered to be a health concern (i.e., less than 1 µm in length).

See links to Health Canada and the World Health Organization at the end of these notes

What are the Regulations and Guidelines for Asbestos in Water?

Health Canada has released its updated *Guidelines for Canadian Drinking Water Quality: Guideline Technical Document – Asbestos* (in draft for public consultation on January 23, 2026 with the consultation period ending March 24, 2026). These guidelines state that “A maximum acceptable concentration (MAC) for asbestos in drinking water is not recommended since there is no consistent, convincing evidence that oral exposure to asbestos causes adverse effects in humans and animals”. None of the provinces or territories in Canada have established MACs or monitoring requirements of their own for asbestos in drinking water.

Health Canada’s guidelines are consistent with the World Health Organization’s determination that it is not considered appropriate or necessary to establish a guideline value for asbestos fibres in drinking water. This was based on their assessment that the overall weight of evidence available does not suggest an increased risk of cancer or other illness following ingestion of asbestos in drinking water.

Managing Safety During A-C Pipe Repair and Removal Work

As noted, asbestos is hazardous when fibres are airborne and inhaled. This risk exists when A-C water pipe is cut during a repair or removal. As such, utilities must follow safe work practices when disturbing A-C pipe during repair and replacement works to mitigate or eliminate the release of asbestos fibres. Additionally, utility workers must wear appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) when completing such works to minimize the risk of exposure due to the release of fibres in airborne dust. The standard practice is to only use hand tools for A-C pipe cutting and keep surfaces wet while repair is in progress to reduce the release of fibres and, in turn, potential exposure to fibres.



What are some Best Practices

In discussing the management of A-C pipes with our utility members, the following were recommended as best practices for any community:

- Conduct an inventory of your pipe system so you know where any A-C pipes are located
- Mark the existence of any A-C pipe on a map and make this map easily available to the public:
 - This will let those being serviced by A-C pipe know of this situation so they can take additional treatment steps at home if they so desire
 - This will also let the large majority know that they are NOT serviced by any A-C pipe
- Provide the scientific information to the public that water from an A-C pipe is not a health risk, but also provide guidance or direction to the public on any additional home treatment if they desire further treatment for their own reassurance (e.g., Brita-type filter or installed systems under sink or in refrigerator).
- While we do not recommend digging up a street just to replace A-C pipe, we do recommend that any A-C pipe be replaced whenever the opportunity arises (e.g., a street reconstruction)
- Prepare clear procedures for the Safe Handling of A-C Pipe by staff and contractors in the event of a pipe cut, failure and/or removal
 - The use of appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE)
 - Hand-cutting of the pipe with constant watering of the cut site
 - Damming of the cut site to capture any fibres from the cut
 - Flushing, disinfection and testing in accordance with AWWA Standard C651.

What is CWWA Doing?

- Monitoring updates to guidance and guidelines related to asbestos-cement water pipes
- Communicating routinely with Health Canada experts on the topic
- Providing current information and reference sources of information to our membership to enhance understanding of this topic and provide support in communicating this topic to stakeholders

References

(1) Guidelines for Canadian Drinking Water Quality: Guideline Technical Document – Asbestos. [Guidelines for Canadian Drinking Water Quality: Guideline Technical Document – Asbestos - Canada.ca](#)

(2) Asbestos in drinking water - Canada.ca.

<https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/publications/healthy-living/asbestos-drinking-water-infographic-2021.html> Accessed 2023-03-22.

(3) Asbestos in drinking water - Canada.ca.

<https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/publications/healthy-living/asbestos-drinking-water-infographic-2021.html> Accessed 2023-03-22.

(4) Is the Asbestos in Our Drinking Water Dangerous?.

<https://www.asbestos.com/blog/2014/12/31/asbestos-in-drinking-water/> Accessed 2023-03-22.