

Steve Bartlett (right), VP and head of the residential construction division at Centra Windows, talks to a worker as he prepares for a window installation.

# Preventing asbestos exposure during window installations

By Sarah Ripplinger

Centra Windows has cultivated customers and retained workers thanks to its no-compromise approach to asbestos abatement and safety precautions.

When he was working in construction in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Jeff Foster would sweep the floor in a cloud of drywall compounds without so much as a dust mask to protect him. Years later, the now VP with Centra Construction Group, aka Centra Windows, learned that dust could very well have contained [asbestos](#) — a naturally occurring fibrous mineral and carcinogen used in more than 3,000 building materials produced from the 1950s to 1990s.

“In 2008, I was looking at some jobs for Centra that had an asbestos component and trying to figure out how we could get trained to handle it ourselves instead of subcontracting it out,” recalls the Centra co-founder,

who heads the company’s multifamily division. “I found some data that showed the death rate across Canada from asbestos.

“At that point, it clicked for me that I had been exposed to a lot of stuff for a couple of years, and that made me pay a lot more attention to what asbestos is,” adds Foster. “Because even though you can’t necessarily see it, it can be there.”

Since then, Centra has taken asbestos abatement and safety precautions to heart. The company of approximately 300 employees operates out of four B.C. offices — Nanaimo, Victoria, Langley, and Kelowna — and has provided full-service window replacement, along with manufacturing and installation of energy-efficient vinyl windows, doors, and siding, for over 30 years.

“One of our prime values is family,” says Centra chief operating officer Jeff Clarke. “We consider our

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employees and customers to be family. We want to keep everyone safe, and we want our workers to be able to retire healthy.”

### **A hidden danger**

Asbestos-related diseases are preventable, yet asbestos remains the leading cause of work-related deaths in B.C. Last year, asbestos-related diseases were responsible for 51 deaths. Disturbing asbestos-containing materials releases the fibres into the air, where they can linger for hours. These fibres can attach to lung tissues, leading to inflammation, scarring, and potentially lung disease, cancer, and death.

Anyone who repairs, renovates, or demolishes older buildings in B.C. is at risk of inhaling asbestos fibres.

Homeowners can also be at risk when undertaking home renovations themselves. And people who work around asbestos without the required personal protective equipment (PPE) can bring it home, potentially exposing family members to asbestos.

### **Ignorance isn’t an excuse; it’s a risk**

Occupational Health and Safety Regulation requirements regarding [asbestos](#) exposure in the workplace have been around since the 1970s, with industry oversight and education gaining a foothold in the early 1980s. However, it was not until 2018 that asbestos was officially banned in Canada. And ignorance or flouting of laws surrounding proper asbestos health and safety measures continues to abound, says Corinne Lapointe, an occupational hygiene officer with WorkSafeBC.

“I’ve seen a lot of employers and employees in residential construction who still don’t take it seriously or are unaware of the risk,” says Lapointe, who has been an officer since the early 1990s. “They expose their workers, themselves, and others.”

While regulation-compliant asbestos management can be a significant cost, “not managing asbestos can also be costly in terms of delays if asbestos is disturbed unknowingly and work has to be stopped in order to properly remove it,” says Don MacFadgen, a supervisor with WorkSafeBC’s Prevention Field Services.

It can also lead to penalties, sanctions, and, most importantly, potential harm to both workers and building occupants if they are exposed due to improper handling of asbestos.

### **Safety culture protects workers and homeowners**

Educating workers and homeowners about asbestos is part of the Centra philosophy, says Clarke. “We want to move the industry forward by demanding safe work procedures so our workers stay safe and homeowners don’t put their families at risk for hours, days, or weeks.”

Centra ensures all of its workers who may be exposed to asbestos on a worksite have hazardous materials training, paying for their wages and a two-day course on how to safely work on sites where asbestos is present. The course covers safe work practices for handling asbestos and abatement procedures. Centra also holds regular knowledge refreshers with workers, along with toolbox talks about asbestos safety precautions.

Whenever a job involves disturbing drywall, stucco, and other building materials that could contain asbestos, Centra sends samples of the materials off to a lab to be tested. If the samples test positive for asbestos, Centra submits a [Notice of Project \(Hazardous substances\)](#) (NOP-H) to WorkSafeBC. An NOP-H must be submitted at least 48 hours before starting construction, demolition, or renovation that involves work with or in proximity to asbestos.



To begin the abatement process, workers don the appropriate PPE, including respirators, eye protection, gloves, and hazmat suits provided by the employer to protect them from exposure.

“We’ve lost some jobs and we’ve had to walk away from others because of customer pushback,” says Steve Bartlett, VP and head of Centra’s residential construction division. “But we need to do abatement work safely because we won’t put our workers’ and homeowners’ health at risk just to win a job.

“We’ve also had a lot of customers who are very thankful that we’ve educated them about asbestos, and many have chosen to go with us because they know that we’re doing the right thing for their health and safety.”

### A winning reputation for safety

Bartlett recalls a time when a customer initially balked at the extra cost to conduct a proper asbestos abatement for their window installation. The homeowner spoke with another contractor who charged less, but whose only precautionary measure was for their workers to wear dust masks.

“When the homeowner realized that asbestos fibres could still go through their home and that no protective measures would be in place to prevent their family from being potentially exposed, they came back to us,” says Bartlett. “It’s something we share as a company as a good news story about the benefits of educating the customer.”

Centra’s commitment to health and safety has also attracted a dedicated group of long-term employees.

“A lot of our people have been here for many years,” says Bartlett. “Our window installers average 10-plus years with us. Many who have left at one point have come back because of our stance on safety.


“In an industry where a lot of workers bounce around, we don’t see that a lot,” he adds. “And I believe that’s the case at Centra because people understand that we care about their well-being and making sure they go home safe each day.”

“It makes a difference when your team notices that you’re investing in them and their safety,” says Foster. “That goes a long way to show them how we value them as members of our workplace family.”

### For more information

WorkSafeBC’s 2021–2023 [residential asbestos initiative](#) aims to prevent further exposure to asbestos on worksites through education and regulatory oversight.

If you have questions about asbestos abatement, please call the Prevention Information Line at 604.276.3100 or toll-free at 1.888.621.7233. Our website also has a number of resources that can help you. Search “asbestos awareness for contractors” on [worksafebc.com](#) to find these resources and more:

- [Safe Work Practices for Handling Asbestos](#) booklet
- [Guideline G6.8](#): Procedures for abatement of asbestos materials during house and building demolition/renovation
- [Ten Simple Steps to Complying with Asbestos Abatement](#) information sheet 

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