Asbestos has received much attention in the media in recent years, leading the American public to fear asbestos as a significant cause of cancer and death. The object of this ACSH report is to examine some of the issues surrounding the health risks from asbestos and to offer a more scientific rationale as to what should be done about the asbestos present in our homes, schools and public buildings.

Asbestos is a naturally occurring mineral which, because of past commercial use, may be found in the ambient air in minute quantities, especially in urban environments. While the use of asbestos is now quite limited, it was for many years incorporated into thousands of common products. When asbestos is in place and in good condition, it does not pose a threat to health. Friable asbestos, that is prone to fragmentation or reduction to powder by hand pressure, can pose some threat to health under particular conditions. The occupational groups which should be monitored for risk of developing asbestos-related diseases are fire fighters, custodians, maintenance workers and asbestos abatement contract workers. Reducing the risk of disease among these groups should be the prime concern to legislators who are formulating regulations regarding asbestos.

Whenever asbestos deteriorates and becomes friable, or when building renovation or demolition is necessary, removal or encapsulation may be required. By contrast, non-occupational exposure to asbestos which is in place and intact in public buildings does not appear to pose a significant health risk. Massive efforts to remove all asbestos from office buildings, schools and homes, even when it is in good repair, can result in the introduction of additional fibers to the ambient air. Such misguided "public health" measures may actually cause more harm than good. Asbestos removal is an expensive and serious undertaking. Improper removal methods can create more of an asbestos risk than existed before removal.

Asbestos [1]