

## **Guidance from The Imperial war Museum**

### **Asbestos in Gas Masks of the Second World War**

Most British gas masks of WW2 vintage have **asbestos** (blue and/or white) as a component in their filters (see list below). Where unsure, it should be assumed that the filters do contain asbestos until proven otherwise. The filters may, in any case, contain other respiratory irritants. **Thus no gas mask of WW2 vintage should ever be worn.**

As regards handling, display and storage, it has been IWM policy for some years to seal all filters on gas masks that are to be used for handling and display; the sealing of filters in the reserve collection has also now commenced. Sealing causes limited damage and can be undertaken by a conservator. But sealing is not always a solution, especially for filters that are damaged, or where the asbestos has already begun to break down. In such cases the asbestos will need removing professionally or, more feasibly, a better condition mask will need acquiring, with the damaged example safely discarded.

Gas masks that have been sealed should not be worn, in case there is a leak from the seal. They can, however, be handled in safety. Details re the method used to seal masks and make them safe can be obtained from the Imperial War Museum, [www.iwm.org.uk](http://www.iwm.org.uk).

#### **Note:**

There is a further health and safety issue with gas masks that have been exposed to chemicals eg used in 'live' gas tests and drills. Such gas masks should not be handled and should not go on display. They should be sealed in polyethylene bags (at least two layers) or an airtight inert container. This should be carried out in a fume cupboard, whilst wearing latex or nitrile gloves and a lab coat. The gloves should be disposed of and the lab coat disposed of/launched after use. The enclosures should be labelled to indicate that they contain materials that are potentially hazardous and should not be opened. Any further enclosures that they are placed into, eg boxes, should be appropriately labelled as described above.

Gas masks coming from unknown sources, where it is impossible to identify whether the gas mask has been exposed to chemicals, should be treated as if they have.

#### **RESPIRATORS (GAS MASKS) THAT CONTAIN ASBESTOS**

- Most WW2 respirators are suspect (except Russian).
- All British WW2 civilian respirators before 1942 (ie. the majority of those found today) contain white and blue asbestos, as do animal masks.
- British WW2 military small box respirators contain blue asbestos

Treat any gas mask as suspect, unless you know otherwise.