

Asbestos in the home

Asbestos is a naturally occurring silicate mineral made up of tiny fibres. When disturbed, it may produce a dust containing asbestos fibres. Breathing these fibres into the lungs may, in turn, cause a range of health problems including pleural plaques, asbestosis, lung cancer and mesothelioma.

Asbestos was commonly used in building materials between the 1940s and the late 1980s. It was used because it is fire resistant, durable and an efficient insulating material. Now that we are aware of the health risks, it is no longer mined in Australia. Since the beginning of 2004, it has also not been imported or used in any Australian products.

Risks of existing asbestos

Asbestos only poses a risk to health when asbestos fibres are breathed in.

The presence of asbestos in home building materials generally does not pose a health risk unless the material is broken, deteriorating or disturbed in such a way that airborne asbestos fibres are produced. There is the potential for this to occur when asbestos-containing material is being broken, or when it is being drilled, sanded or cut with a power tool.

When working on or handling asbestos products, householders should follow the precautions outlined in this fact sheet. These precautions are designed to reduce the risk to householders to a very low level.

It is difficult to tell whether a building material contains asbestos, and the only way to be certain is to have a sample of the material tested by an accredited laboratory (see Where to get help section). If the material is not tested, it should be treated as though it contains asbestos.

Diseases associated with asbestos

Most people who develop asbestos-related diseases have worked on jobs where they frequently breathed in large amounts of asbestos fibres. For example, in the past, construction workers using unsafe practices may have frequently encountered asbestos fibre levels well above background levels. Some may have also carried asbestos fibres home on their clothing, skin and hair, and exposed family members to the fibres.

Asbestos exposure has been linked to a range of diseases including:

- Pleural plaques – thickened patches of scar tissue on the pleura (lining) of the lung
- Asbestosis – progressive scar tissue inside the lungs that impairs breathing
- Lung cancer – can develop decades after asbestos exposure. Smokers and people with asbestosis are most susceptible
- Mesothelioma – a type of cancer that affects the pleura, the covering of the lung and lining of the chest wall and diaphragm. It can also develop decades after asbestos exposure.

Asbestos products found around the home

Asbestos can be loosely or firmly bound. In older homes, firmly bound asbestos may be found in:

- Exterior fibre cement cladding (AC or fibro) and weatherboards
- Artificial brick cladding
- Flexible building boards – eave linings, bathroom linings, cement tile underlay
- Corrugated cement roofing
- Flue pipes

- Architectural cement pipe columns
- Textured paint
- Vinyl floor tiles or coverings.

Loosely bound or 'friable' asbestos was rarely used in domestic situations. However, it is possible that loose asbestos fibres may have been used as:

- Insulation on hot water pipes
- Insulation in old domestic heaters
- Insulation in stoves
- Ceiling insulation products.

As a guide, houses that were built:

- Before the mid-1980s are highly likely to have asbestos-containing products
- Between the mid-1980s and 1990 may have asbestos-containing products
- After 1990 are unlikely to have asbestos-containing products.
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The Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing have produced a booklet on Identifying asbestos in your home (pdf)

Asbestos in automotive parts

Asbestos has also been used by the automotive industry. Asbestos-free car parts have been required by law since the beginning of 2004. You should take care if you are carrying out maintenance on car brakes, clutches or gaskets purchased or installed before that date.

Use professional help to remove asbestos

Householders may legally remove asbestos from their property. However, it is recommended that only a licensed professional remove loosely-bound asbestos. A list of licensed asbestos removalists is available on the Worksafe Victoria website.

When handling asbestos material, you should take precautions to minimise the release of asbestos fibres. If you do not feel confident to safely handle or remove the material, you should engage a licensed asbestos removalist.

Take precautions when removing asbestos

Strict precautions apply to the removal and disposal of asbestos and asbestos-containing materials. You must follow these precautions to protect your family, yourself, your neighbours and the environment when removing, packing, transporting and disposing of asbestos. You should:

- Wear a disposable overall, hat and gloves
- Work in a well-ventilated area
- Wear a disposable, half-face particulate respirator or a half-face filter respirator fitted with a dust/particulate cartridge appropriate for asbestos. Ordinary dust masks are not effective in preventing the inhalation of asbestos fibres and dust. Respirators should comply with Australian/New Zealand Standard 1716
- Lay plastic drop sheets around the area to catch any debris
- Wet the asbestos surface to reduce the risk of dust particles floating into the air
- Carefully pull out any nails
- Not use power tools to saw, grind, drill or break any asbestos product. If necessary, use hand tools instead
- Try not to break the sheets as you remove them
- Place the sheets on the ground, rather than dropping them
- Use a wet mop if you need to sweep,
- Vacuum the area with a vacuum cleaner designed for asbestos fibre collection. The cleaner should be fitted with a high-efficiency particle air (HEPA) filter that conforms to Australian Standard 4260. Bag and seal the vacuum waste and dispose of it at an approved disposal facility.

- After finishing the work, place your clothes in a container marked 'Asbestos-contaminated clothing' for disposal with other contaminated items. Leave the respirator on until contaminated clothing is bagged and sealed.
- Make sure you thoroughly wash your hands and have a shower when you've finished removing asbestos,

Disposal of asbestos cement products

Contact the Environment Protection Authority (EPA) for advice on safely disposing of asbestos and asbestos-contaminated items. Suggestions include:

- Wet the asbestos material.
- Double wrap the material in heavy-duty builders' plastic.
- Seal the plastic completely with tape.
- Label the packages with a warning such as 'Caution – asbestos. Do not open or damage bag. Do not inhale dust'.
- Take or arrange for the packages to be taken to an EPA-approved asbestos disposal facility. The details of these facilities, including a map, are shown in the *asbestos section* of the EPA website.

Where to get help

- Your doctor – for concerns about health
- Your local council's environmental health officer for enquiries or concerns regarding the removal or disposal of asbestos in your neighbourhood
- WorkSafe Victoria Tel. 1800 136 089 for information about asbestos in the workplace and to locate a licensed asbestos removalist
- Environment Protection Authority (EPA) Victoria Tel. (03) 9695 2722 for enquiries about correct disposal of asbestos-containing materials
- National Association of Testing Authorities (NATA) Tel. 1800 621 666 for details of an accredited laboratory in your area where asbestos can be identified
- Asbestoswise Tel. (03) 9654 9555 for information and support for people with asbestos-related disease

Things to remember

- Asbestos is a silicate mineral made up of tiny fibres that form a dust when disturbed.
- Asbestos fibres breathed into the lungs can cause a range of health problems including lung cancer and mesothelioma.
- Australian homes built before 1990 may contain asbestos.
- If you do not feel confident to remove asbestos safely yourself, contact a licensed asbestos removalist.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

DH - RHP&R - Health Protection - Environmental Health Unit

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