

Asbestos in the home

Asbestos is a silicate mineral made up of tiny fibres. When it is disturbed, it produces a dust that contains asbestos fibres. Fibres breathed into the lungs can cause a range of health problems including asbestosis, lung cancer and mesothelioma.

Asbestos – the history

Asbestos was commonly used in building materials between the 1940s and 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 December 2003, it has not been imported or used in any Australian products either.

The risks of existing materials

Generally, the presence of asbestos in home building materials does not pose a health risk unless the material is broken, deteriorating or disturbed in such a way that dust containing asbestos fibres is produced (such as during sanding or sawing).

It is difficult to tell whether a building material contains asbestos. The only way to be certain is to have a sample of the material tested in an accredited laboratory. If you do not want to test the material then it should be treated as though it contains asbestos.

Diseases associated with asbestos

Asbestos-related disease is generally associated with long-term exposure to asbestos in an occupational setting. Asbestos exposure has been linked to a range of diseases including:

- **Pleural plaque** – 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 the 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 develop decades after the 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 the following materials:

- Exterior fibre cement cladding (Fibro) and weatherboards (pre-1984)
- Artificial brick cladding
- Flexible building boards – eave linings, bathroom linings, cement tile underlay (pre-1984)
- All corrugated cement roofing
- Flue pipes (pre-1988)
- Architectural cement pipe columns (pre-1988)
- Patched or repaired plaster
- Textured paint
- Vinyl floor tiles or coverings.

Loose asbestos was rarely used in domestic situations; however, it is possible that loose or knitted asbestos fibres may be used as:

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

As a guide, homes built from 1988 onwards should be asbestos free, while homes built before 1984 may contain significant asbestos sources.

Asbestos has also been used by the automotive industry. Asbestos-free car parts have been law since 31 December 2003, but you should take care if you are carrying out maintenance on car brakes, clutches or gaskets purchased or installed before that date.

Professional help is recommended to remove asbestos

A householder can 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 can be found in the Service Provider Directory at the WorkSafe Victoria website.

If you plan to handle asbestos material, you need to take precautions to minimise the release of asbestos fibre. If you do not feel confident to remove the asbestos material, you should contact a licensed asbestos removalist.

Taking precautions is essential

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 Standard 1716.
- Lay plastic dropsheets 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.
- Do 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.
- If you need to sweep, use a wet mop.
- Vacuum the area with a vacuum cleaner designed for asbestos fibre collection. These cleaners should comply with Australian Standard 3544. Bag and seal the vacuum waste and dispose of 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.
- When you've finished, make sure you thoroughly wash your hands and shower.

Disposing 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 product.
- Wrap it in heavy-duty builders plastic.
- Seal the plastic completely with tape.
- Label the packages with warnings such as 'Caution – asbestos. Do not open or damage bag. Do not inhale dust'.
- Transport the asbestos in a covered bin or covered truck.
- Take the asbestos to an approved disposal facility as suggested by the EPA.

Where to get help

- Your local doctor – for concerns about health
- Your local council's Environmental Health Officer – for enquiries or complaints regarding the removal or disposal of asbestos in your neighbourhood
- Department of Health (Environmental Health Unit) Tel. 1300 761 874 – for a copy of the booklet, *Asbestos in the home*.
- WorkSafe Victoria Tel.1800 136 089 – for information about asbestos in the workplace and to find a licensed asbestos removalist
- Environment Protection Authority Victoria Tel. (03) 9695 2722 – for enquiries about correct disposal of asbestos-containing materials
- Asbestos Diseases Society of Victoria Online.

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 1988 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:

Department of Health - Environmental Health Unit

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