

Asbestos in homes - what can householders do?

This sheet gives you information on the following areas:

- How do I know if it is asbestos?
- What if I'm renting and it's not my property?
- What should I do if I need to disturb any asbestos?
- Working with asbestos cement products.
- Removing asbestos cement sheeting (fibro).
- Disposing of asbestos containing materials.

The first thing is: don't panic. If you think you've found asbestos in your home, **don't touch it**. Asbestos in the home is a risk when it is disturbed in a way which produces fibres or dust containing asbestos fibres. This could include demolition work, renovating, drilling or doing work in or on roofs, around insulated pipes, and so on.

Unfortunately, there is asbestos containing materials in many Australian homes. Asbestos was commonly used in many building materials before the early 1980's because of its durability, fire resistance and insulating properties.

Asbestos in the home can be in one of two forms. The most common is in firmly bound material (such as asbestos cement sheeting or 'fibro'; water or flue pipes, roof shingles and flexible building boards, some types of vinyl floor tiles or 'lino', plaster patching compounds, etc). The second is in the form of loose asbestos fibres and was used in certain types of insulation products for hot water pipes, domestic heaters and stoves, and ceiling insulation.

How do I know if it is asbestos?

It is very difficult to identify if material actually contains asbestos. The identification of asbestos fibres must be done by a qualified professional analyst who has been approved by NATA (National Association of Testing Authorities), but as a general rule, if your home was built before the early 1980's then it is likely that asbestos is present. If the material is in good condition and unlikely to release fibres, then it can be left in place. This may be the case for tiles, floors and painted, sealed surfaces. If, however the surfaces have deteriorated, or are going to be demolished, then it should be replaced.

What if I'm renting and it's not my property?

If you are renting and believe that you or your family is being exposed to asbestos either due to the deterioration of asbestos containing materials or due to repair/renovation work, contact the agent or the owner immediately. As the occupier of the property, you should have been notified **prior to** any work being done at the property. When any work is being done, you need to make sure that if any asbestos is found, it will be removed and disposed of properly. If the work is being done by someone other than the owner, the property becomes a workplace, and any removal work must be done by an approved removalist.

If work has already begun, ask the workers to stop immediately and not to continue until you have spoken to the owner/agent.

In a recent case reported in *The Age* a woman who developed lung cancer (mesothelioma) after she was exposed to asbestos while living in public housing

won compensation. She reached a confidential out-of-court settlement with the Director of Housing.

If you have a problem with either the owner or the agent, contact the Tenant's Union on 03) 9416 2577, or call into their offices at 55 Johnston St, Fitzroy.

What should I do if I need to disturb any asbestos?

Special precautions need to be taken to reduce exposure to asbestos while sawing, sanding, grinding, drilling, breaking, general maintenance, renovation or demolition activities, as dust/fibre may be produced.

Asbestos-cement products in the home can be maintained, removed or disposed of safely (and legally) as long as necessary precautions are carefully followed. If in doubt, call in the experts. If you are not going to do the work yourself, then only a licensed removalist can remove and dispose of it.

If you, or a removalist, is working, demolishing or removing asbestos containing materials, remember your neighbours, and let them know what's going on. Under the Nuisance Act, any nuisances which are, or are liable to be, offensive or dangerous to health could be investigated by an environmental health officer of your local council.

Working with Asbestos Cement Products

The aim is to minimise generating any dust or fibres and to avoid contaminating the work area:

1. Work with asbestos-cement products in well-ventilated areas, if possible, outdoors
2. You must wear a disposable, half-face particulate filter or a half-face respirator fitted with a dust/particulate cartridge appropriate for asbestos (which comply with Australian Standard 1716). Wear disposable overalls to prevent contamination of any clothing. After work is complete, remove overalls and disposable mask, seal in a container and mark "Asbestos contaminated clothing" for proper disposal. Thoroughly wash hands.
Warning on dust masks: Do not use the simple disposable dust masks which provide no protection against asbestos fibres.
3. You must wet down the material thoroughly before you start work, and keep it wet while working. This reduces the release of dust during handling. Do not use high pressure water jets as this may increase the spread of any loose material.
4. *Do not use power tools, abrasive cutting or sanding discs on asbestos-cement products.* Only use non-powered hand tools (eg guillotine, hand-saw) as these cause a smaller quantity of coarser dust and waste chips.
5. Use plastic drop sheets to collect cut-offs and coarse dust. Clean up any remaining asbestos-cement in the work areas with a vacuum cleaner appropriate for collecting asbestos fibres (should comply with Australian Standard 3544). **It is unsafe to use a domestic vacuum cleaner as the waste is not contained well.** If you have to sweep, keep the surfaces wet to suppress dust.

Removing Asbestos Cement Sheeting (fibro)

The following precautions should be followed when removing asbestos cement roofing, wall sheeting or other "fibro" products from the home:

1. Keep all windows and doors of the house closed.
2. As per Step 2, above

3. As per Step 3, above. Do NOT wet down sheets if it creates a high risk of slipping from a roof.
4. Pull out any nails first and remove the asbestos cement sheeting with minimal breakage. Carefully lower, but not drop, the sheets to the ground. Minimise cutting or breaking up the sheets.
5. Stack the sheets on a ground sheet. Do not leave them around the garden where they could break or be crushed, or where children may play around them.
6. Do not re-use asbestos cement sheets.

Disposing of asbestos containing materials

All asbestos cement sheeting and off-cuts, pipes, insulation, collected dust, and protective clothing can only be disposed of in a certain way and only at a site licensed by the Environment Protection Authority. It is illegal to dispose of it at your local tip.

For packing sheeting and pipes:

1. Thoroughly wet all the articles and maintain in a wet condition until packaged for transport.
2. Place the articles on two layers of polythene sheeting (approx 0.2mm thick) to a manageable weight and completely wrap the articles. Seal with adhesive tape.
3. Label the packages with a warning sign about 75mm x 90mm, stating: "CAUTION. ASBESTOS. DO NOT OPEN OR DAMAGE BAG. DO NOT INHALE DUST"

For more information:

- *National Association of Testing Authorities* - for a NATA registered laboratory in your area which can identify asbestos: Telephone (03) 9329 1633
- *WorkSafe Victoria* - for a licensed asbestos removal company in your area and enquiries relating to removal work carried out in the workplace or home by a licensed asbestos removalist: Telephone (03) 9641 1444, Toll-free 1800 136 089
- **Where to dispose of asbestos waste**, a list of premises licensed to accept waste asbestos, on this site
- *Environment Protection Authority Victoria Information Centre* - for a disposal landfill site in your area, and enquiries relating to the correct disposal of asbestos materials: Telephone (03) 9695 2722
- *Department of Human Services (Environmental Health Unit)* - for enquiries relating to potential public health effects of asbestos, including in the home: Telephone: (03) 9637 4156
- *Your Local Council (Chief Environmental Health Officer)* - for enquiries or complaints regarding the incorrect removal or disposal of asbestos in your neighbourhood. (Refer to the phone directory)