

Asbestos: When Should I Worry?

What is asbestos?

Asbestos refers to a group of naturally occurring mineral fibres found in rock. For decades, asbestos was used as a building material in homes and other buildings. Asbestos is usually white, and its matted fibres can be crumbly if unbound or deteriorated.

Asbestos is no longer widely used commercially, but it can still be found in many older homes and buildings. You may find asbestos wrapped around older hot water pipes and water boilers, or used to tape together sections of heating ducts. You may also find asbestos in cement, flooring and ceiling materials.

Which health problems are caused by asbestos?

Most of the time asbestos poses very little risk to your health. The fibers are only a risk if they are released into the air and are inhaled.

When large amounts of asbestos fibres are inhaled, they can become lodged in your lungs and remain there. This can cause scarring and inflammation. Regular or long periods of exposure to high concentrations of asbestos in the air can be harmful to your health. It could increase your risk of getting a variety of diseases such as:

- asbestosis (scarring of the lungs);
- lung cancer; and
- mesothelioma (a rare form of cancer of the lining of the body cavity).

Many factors influence how exposure to asbestos will affect your health. Risk factors include:

- your health history, such as if you smoke or have pre-existing lung diseases;
- how much asbestos was in the air;
- how long your exposure lasted;
- how often you were exposed; and
- the type, size and shape of asbestos fibers.

Smokers, and people with pre-existing lung diseases, have a greater risk of developing asbestos related diseases if exposed.

Diseases from asbestos take many years to develop. On average, it can take 15 to 30 years for diseases to develop after exposure.

Who is at risk of asbestos exposure?

You are only at risk of asbestos exposure when the fibers are released into the air and breathed in.

If your home was built before 1990, then you are more likely to have asbestos in your home. It could be in the insulation wrapped around your furnace ducts or pipes, as well as in your floor tiles and other areas.

Asbestos only poses a potential health risk when it is disturbed, fraying or crumbling and fibers are released into the air. Asbestos fibers that are enclosed behind walls, isolated in attics, bound tightly in an intact product, or kept away from the interior environment of a home or building poses little risk.

Tests show that removing asbestos from older buildings can actually increase the risk of exposure and the quantity of asbestos fibres in the air if the proper precautions are not followed.

Asbestos exposure and related diseases have also been reported in asbestos workers, their families and people who live near asbestos mines or processing facilities. Construction and trade workers involved in renovations and repairs to older buildings are at higher risk of asbestos exposure if proper safety measures are not followed.

How can I make my home safe?

If you live in an older home, make a visual check of all your hot water pipes and furnace air ducts. Look to see if the asbestos or insulation material is breaking or coming apart. If it is breaking or coming apart, do not disturb it. This may create more asbestos dust that can spread in your home. Keep people and pets away, and consult with an asbestos removal expert before you attempt to remove or seal the material.

Some forms of insulation may look like asbestos, but they are actually mineral or fibreglass-based insulation materials that are unlikely to pose a health risk. You can't always tell by just looking whether a material contains asbestos. It is always best to be safe and have a sample of the material tested for asbestos by a professional.

If you are renovating an older house, be alert to unexpected sources of asbestos. Get a professional opinion before starting the renovation and hire a professional to conduct the removal. Power-sanding floor tiles, plaster walls or partitions made partly from asbestos can release dangerous quantities of inhalable fibres into the air.

For More Information

For more information, visit the following websites:

- Management of Waste Asbestos:
www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/environment/waste-management/hazardous-waste/registration-of-hazardous-waste-generators-and-facilities/management-of-waste-asbestos
- WorkSafeBC – Asbestos awareness for homeowners:
www.worksafebc.com/en/health-safety/hazards-exposures/asbestos/think-asbestos

To find a professional who can test a sample of your material to see if it is asbestos, look in the Yellow Pages™ or on the internet for Laboratories for Analytical Services or Environmental Services.

To find a contractor who specializes in asbestos abatement and removal from your home, look in the Yellow Pages™ or on the internet under Asbestos Abatement/Removal. These contractors use specialized and personal protective equipment and professional methods for removing asbestos dust and disposing of the material safely.