

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. It was also used in automotive parts like brake linings.

Asbestos is usually white. The matted fibres can be crumbly and become airborne if unbound or deteriorated.

Asbestos is no longer widely used commercially, but it can still exist 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. It becomes a risk only if you inhale asbestos fibers that are released into the air.

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

- Asbestosis (scarring of the lungs)
- Lung cancer
- Mesothelioma (a rare form of cancer of the lining of the body cavity)

What are the risk factors for asbestos exposure?

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

- Your health history, such as whether 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
- The type, size and shape of asbestos fibres you were exposed to

Disease from asbestos exposure can take many years to develop. Depending on the risk factors listed above, it can take 15 to 30 years for a disease to develop after exposure.

Who is at risk of asbestos exposure?

If your home was built before 1990, it is more likely to contain asbestos. It could be in insulation wrapped around your furnace ducts or pipes. It could also be in your floor tiles and other areas.

Asbestos only poses a health risk when it becomes damaged. This occurs through fraying or crumbling, or when the fibres are released into the air. Asbestos fibres should remain undisturbed and isolated from the living environment of a home or building. Asbestos is generally not released when it is enclosed behind walls, isolated in attics or tightly bound within an intact product.

Asbestos exposure and related diseases have been reported in asbestos workers and their families. Cases have also been documented in people living 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. Risk increases when safety measures are not followed.

How can I make my home safe?

If you live in an older home, do a visual check of all your hot water pipes and furnace air ducts. If you find insulation material that could contain asbestos and it is breaking or coming apart, do not disturb it. If you have vermiculite-based attic insulation it may also contain asbestos. If you have it in your attics or walls, don't disturb it. Keep children out of the attic. Don't use the attic for storage. Seal gaps around light fixtures, electrical outlets, and window and door frames.

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

Keep people and pets away and consult with an asbestos removal expert to remove the material safely. Some forms of insulation may look like asbestos but are actually mineral or fibreglass-based. They are unlikely to pose a health risk. You can't always tell just by looking whether a material contains asbestos. It is always best to hire a professional to collect and test a sample of the material for asbestos.

If you are renovating an older house, be alert to unexpected sources of asbestos. For example, power sanding floor tiles or plaster walls containing asbestos can release dangerous quantities of fibres into the air. Get a professional opinion before starting a renovation. Hire a professional to conduct the removal.

To find a professional who can test a sample of your material for asbestos, visit the Directory of Qualified Laboratories in B.C. at www.nrs.gov.bc.ca/qualified-labs.

To find a contractor who specializes in asbestos reduction and removal from your home, check your local business directory. You can also search online for asbestos abatement or removal.

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/managing-waste-asbestos
- WorkSafeBC – Asbestos: FAQs for homeowners
www.worksafebc.com/en/resources/health-safety/information-sheets/asbestos-frequently-asked-questions?lang=en
- WorkSafeBC – What You Need to Know (Homeowners)
www.worksafebc.com/en/resources/health-safety/information-sheets/asbestos-what-homeowners-need-to-know?lang=en