



Asbestos

A home renovator's guide

Get up to scratch with the facts about asbestos.
Find out how to handle, remove and dispose of it safely and legally in Queensland.

Now it's a whole new ball game



Queensland Government
Queensland Health

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Disclaimer

The advice in this booklet is designed as a guide only. While following this advice will minimise the risks of exposure to asbestos in the home, we cannot guarantee all risks will be eliminated. This is because circumstances will vary depending on the type and condition of the materials containing asbestos and other factors. If you are uncertain about any of the advice in this booklet, please call 1300 QH info (1300 744 636) before starting work.

References in this booklet to 'law', 'laws', 'specific laws' and similar refer to the *Public Health and Other Legislation Amendment Regulation 2007*.

The information in this booklet has been adapted from the 2005 enHealth Council publication *Management of asbestos in the non-occupational environment*, the *Public Health and Other Legislation Amendment Regulation 2007*, the 2005 NOHSC *Code of Practice for the Management and Control of Asbestos in Workplaces*, the 2005 NOHSC *Code of Practice for the Safe Removal of Asbestos in Workplaces 2nd Edition* and the Health and Safety Executive (HSE), United Kingdom.

Asbestos

How to play it safe

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What is asbestos?

Asbestos is a naturally occurring mineral found in the surface of the earth. It contains strong fibres that have excellent durability, fire resistance and insulating properties. Asbestos fibres are 50 to 200 times thinner than a human hair, can float in the air for a long time, can be invisible to the naked eye and can be breathed into the lungs.

In the past, asbestos was mined from the ground and manufactured into many different materials. Materials containing asbestos were very common in the Australian residential building industry between the 1940s and late 1980s before their production stopped.

The use of all forms of asbestos has been banned nationally since 31 December 2003. The ban does not apply to asbestos installed prior to this date (e.g. asbestos materials in houses).

What are the possible health effects of asbestos?

Asbestos can cause health effects if fibres are breathed into the lungs. Most fibres are removed from your lungs by your body's natural defences (e.g. by being coughed up and then swallowed), however some fibres can remain in the lungs.

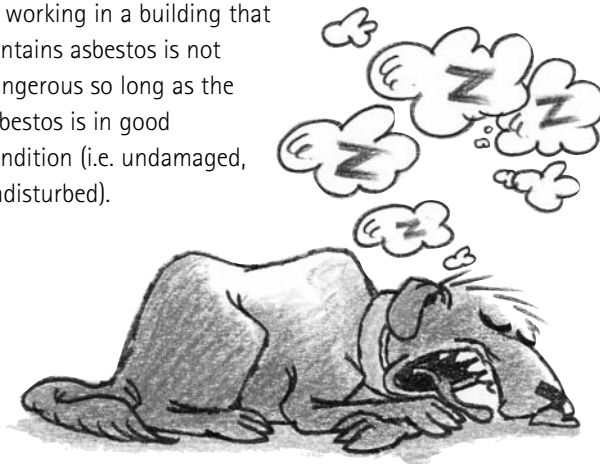
The possible health effects of asbestos are:

- Asbestosis (progressive and irreversible scarring of lung tissue that impairs breathing)
- Lung cancer
- Mesothelioma is a cancer of the linings around the lungs and abdomen
- Non-cancerous diseases that affect the linings around the lungs and abdomen (commonly called 'benign pleural diseases').

These diseases can sometimes take up to 50 years to develop. There may be some treatments for asbestos related diseases, but there are currently no known cures. Further general information on asbestos related diseases is available from the Queensland Health web site (www.health.qld.gov.au).

Is it dangerous?

Current scientific and medical evidence supports the fact that simply living or working in a building that contains asbestos is not dangerous so long as the asbestos is in good condition (i.e. undamaged, undisturbed).



If asbestos is in good condition, leave it alone – let sleeping dogs lie!

It is when asbestos is worked with or disturbed and asbestos fibres are released that the risk of developing an asbestos related disease is increased.

While most cases of asbestos related diseases result from sustained workplace exposure, some asbestos related diseases, particularly mesothelioma, can result from brief periods of breathing in asbestos fibres.

To minimise the chance of anyone being exposed to asbestos, it is **very important** that DIY home renovators prevent the release of asbestos fibres into the air.

Play it safe with asbestos. Before working with or removing a material that contains asbestos, consider:

- If it is in good condition (e.g. undamaged), can you leave it alone?
- Do you know the alternatives to removing the material containing asbestos (e.g. painting or sealing, covering with a non-asbestos product)?
- Can you comply with the laws and safety procedures for working with asbestos (see page 7)?
- Should you use a licensed person?

The two types of material containing asbestos

There are two types of material used in housing construction that contain asbestos:

1. Bonded (Tightly Bound) Asbestos

Bonded materials containing asbestos are the most common in domestic houses. They are mainly made up of a bonding compound (such as cement), with up to 15% asbestos. Bonded materials containing asbestos are solid, quite rigid and the asbestos fibres are tightly bound in the material. They are commonly called 'fibro', 'asbestos cement' and 'AC sheeting'.



Image courtesy of Dept of Human Services, Victoria

Asbestos cement sheeting on the wall and roof of a shed.

2. Loosely Bound (Friable) Asbestos

Loosely bound materials containing asbestos are not commonly found in domestic houses. They were primarily used in commercial and industrial settings for fire proofing, sound proofing and insulation. However, they can be found in some old domestic heaters, stoves, hot water systems and associated pipe lagging and in the backing of vinyl and linoleum floor coverings.

These materials can be made of up to 100% asbestos. They are quite loose and can be turned to dust with very light pressure, such as crushing with your hand. Loosely bound materials containing asbestos are very dangerous as the asbestos fibres can get into the air very easily. They **must** only be handled and removed by an asbestos removalist with an 'A' Class certificate (see page 7 for more information on certificates).

Do I have materials containing asbestos in my house?

It can be difficult to tell whether your home has materials containing asbestos in it just by looking, but you may recognise the following image of an asbestos roof.

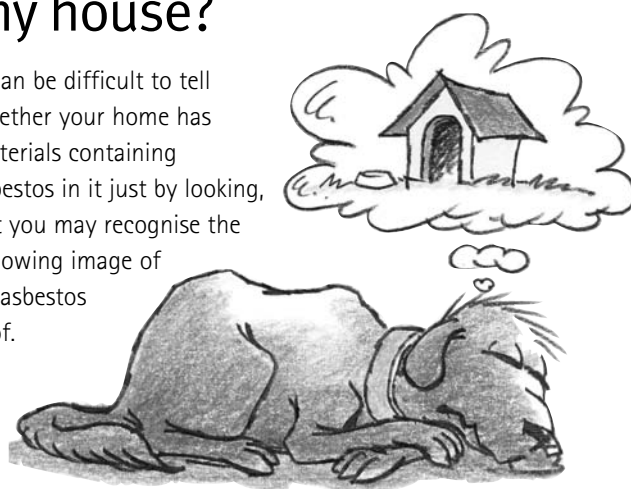


Image courtesy of Dept of Human Services, Victoria

Underside of asbestos cement roof sheeting.

As a general rule, if your house was built:

- Before the mid 1980s, it is **highly likely** that it would have materials containing asbestos.
- Between the mid 1980s and 1990, it is **likely** that it would have materials containing asbestos.
- After 1990, it is **highly unlikely** it would have materials containing asbestos.

If you are not sure that a material contains asbestos, play it safe and assume that it does. Alternatively, you can get advice from an asbestos consultant or get the material tested by a laboratory (see page 5).

Where could I find materials containing asbestos inside my house?

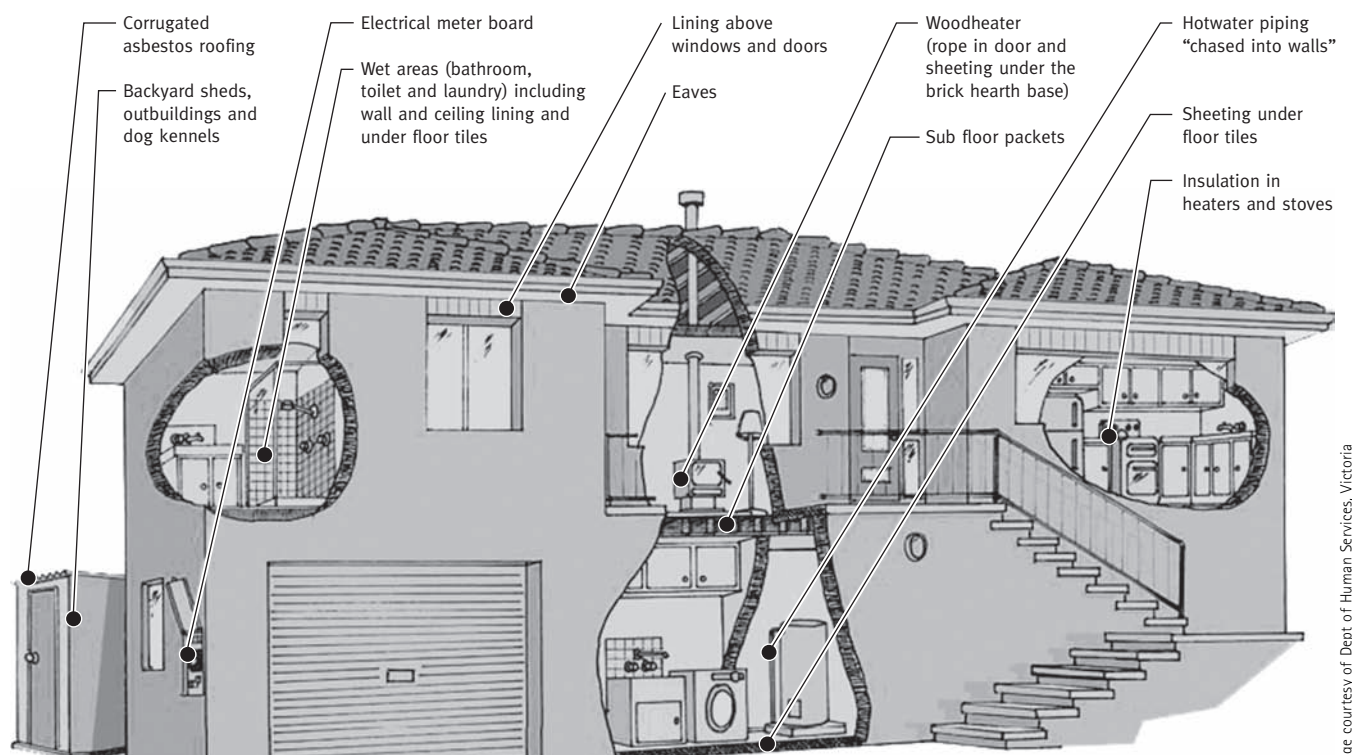
Bonded materials containing asbestos were often used inside houses for wall sheeting, particularly in 'wet' areas such as the kitchen, bathroom and laundry (e.g. the glazed patterned panels around showers and baths that are held in with screws). They were also used as ceiling sheeting. Asbestos might also be found bonded in plaster patching compounds and textured paint.

Loosely bound materials containing asbestos might be found in a few older forms of insulation used in domestic heaters and stoves. Asbestos-felt was used as a backing for many vinyl and linoleum sheet floorings and does not pose a health risk while it remains undisturbed. However, these materials become loose when the floor covering is damaged or removed.

If you are planning to remove these materials and you are unsure if it is asbestos-free, consider leaving it alone, seeking advice from an asbestos consultant or getting it **tested by a laboratory** (see page 5).

Asbestos insulation was not routinely used in residential buildings, although there have been isolated cases in New South Wales and the ACT. Loosely-bound asbestos was generally used in commercial buildings and industrial workplaces.

Asbestos-felt vinyl flooring and other forms of loose asbestos must only be removed by an asbestos removal business that holds an 'A' Class certificate.



Common locations of materials containing asbestos in a house.

Image courtesy of Dept of Human Services, Victoria

Where could I find materials containing asbestos outside my house?

Externally, bonded materials containing asbestos were commonly used for roof sheeting and capping, guttering, gables, eaves/soffits, water pipes and flues, wall sheeting, flexible building boards and imitation brick cladding. They have also been used for fencing and building car ports and sheds.

Loosely bound materials containing asbestos were not designed for use on the outside of houses.

As mentioned before, bonded materials containing asbestos are the most common asbestos materials in domestic houses. They are not dangerous if they are in good condition (i.e. undamaged, undisturbed). Loosely bound asbestos materials are not common in domestic houses.



Image courtesy of Dept of Human Services, Victoria

External cladding containing asbestos.

Do new building materials contain asbestos?

No. Since 31 December 2003, asbestos and all products containing asbestos have been banned throughout Australia. It is illegal to import, store, supply, sell, install, use or re-use these materials. The ban does not apply to asbestos installed prior to this date (e.g. asbestos in houses).

Asbestos has not been used in domestic building materials since the 1980s. Cellulose fibres are now used instead of asbestos in building materials and non-asbestos fibres, such as glass, are now used in insulation products. However, manufacturers warn that other health effects, such as skin and throat irritation, can still result from the inhalation of dust created when cutting these fibrous building products.

What should I do if I find asbestos in my home?

If materials containing asbestos are in your home and are in good condition (i.e. undamaged, undisturbed), the safest option is to leave them alone. In other words, let sleeping dogs lie! If left alone and in good condition, these materials are not dangerous as the asbestos fibres are tightly bound and very few escape into the air over time. Visually inspect the materials from time to time for deterioration and damage.

If you are thinking about working with or removing a material that contains asbestos, consider:

- If it is in good condition (e.g. undamaged), can you leave it alone?
- Do you know the alternatives to removing the material containing asbestos (e.g. painting or sealing, covering with a non-asbestos product)?
- Can you comply with the laws and safety procedures for working with asbestos (see page 7)?
- Should you use a licensed asbestos removalist?

Can I get materials tested for asbestos?

Yes. Laboratories that analyse building materials for asbestos can be found by contacting the National Association of Testing Authorities (Ph. 07 3870 3844, www.nata.asn.au). The laboratories can also give you advice on how to correctly take and send a sample. There will be fees involved. You can also contact an asbestos consultant for advice. They can be found in the Yellow Pages under "Asbestos".

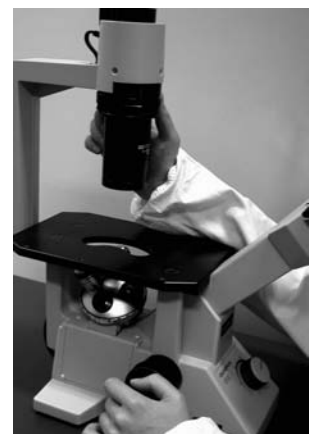


Image courtesy of Dept of Human Services, Victoria

Microscope for identifying asbestos.