



## Asbestos: When Should I Worry?

### What is asbestos?

Asbestos, a mineral, was used for decades as an insulator and fire retardant in homes and other 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 used for ceiling plaster and flooring materials.

Asbestos is usually white in colour. Its matted fibres can be crumbly if unbound or deteriorated. Although asbestos is no longer widely used commercially, it can still be found in many homes, commercial buildings, and even roads.

### Which health problems are caused by asbestos?

When large amounts of asbestos fibres are inhaled, they can cause asbestosis (scarring of the lungs), lung cancer, and mesothelioma (tumours in the lining of the body cavity).

In the early 1930s, the dangers of inhaled asbestos became noticeable when many workers became ill after prolonged exposure to air-borne asbestos fibres.

Asbestos is not a risk to your health if it is in one piece and not releasing fibres into the air.

### Who is at risk?

In recent years, schools and offices have closed to remove asbestos from public buildings.

Asbestos poses very little risk most of the time. Tests show that removing asbestos from older buildings can actually increase the risk of exposure and the quantity of asbestos fibres in the air.

### Does my home contain asbestos?

If your home is more than 20 years old, then you are more likely to have asbestos insulation wrapped around your furnace ducts or pipes, as well as in your floor tiles and other areas.

Asbestos is not a risk to your health if the material is in good condition. Asbestos poses a potential health risk only when it is fraying or crumbling.

### How can I make my home safe?

Make a visual check of all your hot water pipes and furnace air ducts. If the asbestos or insulation material is breaking or coming apart, cover it up. To protect against asbestos fibres, you should wear a face mask, disposable coveralls, and gloves to do this work.

Buy a roll of duct tape and completely rewrap any areas that are no longer intact. Once the work is done, take extra care to contain any dust using a wet cloth and drop sheet. Do not use a vacuum cleaner to collect asbestos dust, as most vacuum bags allow the smaller, more dangerous fibres to pass through the collection bag and back into the air.

Some forms of insulation may look like asbestos, but they are actually mineral or fibreglass-based insulation materials that are not a health risk. If you are not sure, it is always best to be safe. You can have a sample of the material tested for asbestos. Look in the Yellow Pages or on the Internet for Laboratories for Analytical Services or Environmental Services.

For information on removing asbestos from your home, look in the Yellow Pages or on the Internet for Asbestos Abatement for professional contractors who specialize in this service. Professionals use methods for removing asbestos dust and disposing of the material properly.

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

For more information, visit the [BC Ministry of Environment](http://www.gov.bc.ca/env/) website at [www.gov.bc.ca/env/](http://www.gov.bc.ca/env/) or contact your local environmental health officer.

For more HealthLink BC File topics, visit [www.HealthLinkBC.ca/healthfiles/index.stm](http://www.HealthLinkBC.ca/healthfiles/index.stm) or your local public health unit.

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