

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 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 is only a risk if you breathe in 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 long periods of exposure to high levels 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
- 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 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
- The type, size and shape of asbestos fibers you were exposed to

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

Who is at risk of asbestos exposure?

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. It could also be in your floor tiles and other areas.

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

Asbestos exposure and related diseases have been reported in asbestos workers and their families. It has also been reported in those 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 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. 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 insulation materials. 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. Power sanding floor tiles or plaster walls containing asbestos for example can release dangerous quantities of fibres into the air. Get a professional opinion before starting the 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, look in the Yellow Pages™ or search on the Internet 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