

Asbestos – frequently asked questions

Asbestos is the name given to a group of fibrous silicate minerals which were mined in Australia and overseas and used for a range of products.

All forms of asbestos can cause diseases including pleural plaques, asbestosis, mesothelioma and lung cancer if inhaled in sufficient quantities over a sufficient period of time.

Inhaling asbestos fibres can result in these diseases, but this does not automatically mean that your health is at risk if you find that your home contains materials made from asbestos. Studies show that these products, if undisturbed and well maintained, may not present a significant health risk if the material is in good condition.

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What is asbestos?

Asbestos is the name given to a group of naturally occurring mineral fibres which were used extensively in many products owing mainly to the strength and insulating features of the fibres and their resistance to fire and erosion.

What is the difference between friable and non friable asbestos?

Non-friable means that the asbestos fibres included in the product are held within a solid matrix (e.g. cement in asbestos cement sheeting) and are less likely to become airborne unless the product is damaged. Asbestos fences, rooves and asbestos cement sheeting are examples of non-friable asbestos products.

Friable asbestos products contain loosely packed asbestos fibres and can be crushed easily in the hand. Examples of friable asbestos products include insulating rope on old oven doors, asbestos insulation and asbestos fibre blankets.

How do I know if a material contains asbestos?

Generally, it is not possible to determine whether a material contains asbestos simply by looking at it. The only way to be sure it contains asbestos is to get a sample analysed by a NATA (National Association of Testing Authorities, Australia) accredited laboratory. Look up 'Environmental Consultants' in the Yellow Pages.

If in doubt, treat the suspect material as though it does contain asbestos.

What are the health effects caused by exposure to asbestos?

Inhalation of asbestos fibres can cause the following diseases:

- Pleural Plaques
- Pleural Thickening
- Asbestosis
- Lung Cancer
- Mesothelioma

Generally, a large, on-going exposure to asbestos fibres is required before an asbestos-related disease will develop. It is unusual to develop an asbestos-related disease from a single exposure.

What are the health effects caused by exposure to asbestos cement products?

Asbestos cement sheeting (and other non-friable asbestos products) do not pose a health risk as long as the products are in good condition, well maintained and are not disturbed or damaged. If the products become damaged however, asbestos fibres may become airborne and it is advised to have them removed.

How do I remove and dispose of asbestos?

It is generally advised to employ a licensed contractor to remove asbestos from the home; however, you can do it yourself. When removing asbestos materials you must comply with the Code of Practice for the Safe Removal of Asbestos (2nd Edition). Read the Asbestos and the Home Renovator booklet (available from Local Council or visit http://www.safework.sa.gov.au/uploaded_files/asbestos_homerenovator.pdf) for steps on how to safely remove asbestos material from your home and details of correct Personal Protective Equipment.

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Key points to remember are:

- Wear suitable Personal Protective Equipment.
- Do not use power tools on any asbestos material.
- Gently wet down the surface of asbestos material before commencing removal. Do not use high pressure and do not scrub the surface/s.
- Remove asbestos cement sheeting, fences, and rooves etc as whole sheets; do not break them up.
- Wrap the asbestos products in thick building plastic (200 micron thick) and seal all seams with duct tape. Label the waste as asbestos waste.
- Wrap and label protective equipment in the same way once removal is completed. Dispose of the equipment as asbestos waste. REMEMBER: Make sure the respirator is the last thing to be removed, wrapped and disposed of.
- Dispose of asbestos material at an approved landfill site; details available from the EPA (www.epa.sa.gov.au)
- Disposable gloves
- Either water-proof/resistant footwear which can be wiped down with a wet cloth or disposable shoe covers. Once the removal is complete and the waste has been appropriately packaged for disposal, either wipe down footwear with a wet cloth and wash the shoelaces or dispose of the shoe covers as asbestos contaminated waste.
- ALWAYS REMEMBER: your respirator should be the first thing you put on and the last thing you take off. Always dispose of Personal Protective Equipment as “Asbestos Waste – Do Not Inhale Dust” and bag your respirator separately to the remainder of the waste (labelling in the same fashion) to avoid being exposed to fibres released from protective equipment.

What should I wear when removing asbestos products from my home?

When removing asbestos products from the home, it is important to take steps to prevent exposure to any airborne asbestos fibres.

Wear:

- A respirator. Either a half face respirator fitted with asbestos-rated cartridges or a disposable P1 or P2 dust respirator is recommended. Follow the manufacturer's instructions for proper use of the respirator.
- Disposable coveralls (preferably one with a hood attached)

How do I clean up after asbestos has been removed from my house?

Wipe down surfaces with a wet cloth. Mop hard floors and tip the water down the sink. For soft furnishings, hire an asbestos-rated vacuum cleaner from an asbestos removal company. DO NOT use a domestic vacuum cleaner as these cleaners recirculate the asbestos fibres in the air.

Do I have to remove asbestos products from within my home?

No. If you have asbestos products in your home that are in good condition, are well maintained and are not damaged or decomposing, there is no need to remove these products from your house. If vinyl floor tiles become worn through, internal walls become damaged, insulation or lagging starts to break down etc, it is advised to have these products removed from your home responsibly to reduce the potential for asbestos exposure.

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Where do I go to get a licensed asbestos removalist?

For appropriately licensed removalists, see 'Asbestos Removal &/or Treatment' in the Yellow Pages.

Where can I dispose of asbestos waste?

For a list of approved asbestos disposal sites, contact the EPA or visit <http://www.epa.sa.gov.au>

Do I need to get approval before removing asbestos from my house?

Check with your Local Council about approvals for building, renovation and demolition.

I have an asbestos fence; how do I go about getting it removed?

Fencing issues come under the Fences Act which is administered by your Local Council. Read through the 'Fences and the Law' booklet (available from your Local Council) for information about the processes involved in removing an existing fence.

There is a building nearby having asbestos removed. Should I have been told this was happening?

Although licensed contractors are advised to inform immediate neighbours of a planned asbestos removal in writing, it is not a regulation.

What should I do if a neighbour has asbestos removed from their house?

It is advised that you keep your windows and doors shut and don't hang clothes on the clothes line during the asbestos removal and clean up.

I have just bought a house and have found asbestos within the property. Should I have been told?

New legislation has been introduced which requires agents to give all prospective purchasers an information notice or checklist to assist them to discover whether there are features of the property that may adversely affect the property value, enjoyment or safety of the land, e.g. the presence of asbestos.

It is advised to obtain a building inspection prior to purchasing a house.

All real estate issues should be directed to the Real Estate Institute of South Australia.

I am worried asbestos dust may have entered my rain water tank. What should I do?

Don't worry. Asbestos has only been shown to cause health effects if the fibres are inhaled. Asbestos is a naturally occurring mineral; there are background levels present in rainwater anyway.

Occupational issues

Any issues with the management of asbestos in an occupational environment should be referred to SafeWork SA Help and Early Intervention Centre on 1300 365 255.

Serious health concerns

If you have a serious health concern, see your doctor!

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If you are an employee of a school concerned about the presence of asbestos in the school...

Contact the Department of Education and Child Services (8226 1527) for further information regarding the schools asbestos register and any planned asbestos removal.

If you are a Housing SA tenant concerned about asbestos in or being removed from the property...

Contact your Housing SA maintenance manager.

If you are concerned about asbestos in a nursing home...

Nursing homes are governed by a Commonwealth Authority. For general enquiries contact 1800 288 025. For the South Australian office, call 8217 6000.

If you are a private rental tenant concerned about asbestos in the house...

Tenants are required to negotiate the removal of the asbestos with their landlord. If you are experiencing difficulty in coming to an agreement, contact the Office of Consumer and Business Affairs, Tenancies Branch on 8204 9544.

For further information...

- For health related concerns: SA Health
Ph 8226 7100
www.health.sa.gov.au
- For licensing, monitoring and occupational issues: SafeWork SA Help and Early Intervention Centre
Ph 1300 365 255
www.safework.sa.gov.au
- For transport and disposal issues:
EPA
Ph 8204 2004
www.epa.sa.gov.au

Translation Service

For information in languages other than English, call the Interpreting and Translating Centre and ask them to call the Department of Health.

This service is available at no cost to you; contact 8226 1990.

Contact

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