

Asbestos in Your Home

Facts about asbestos - where it may be used and what to do if you find it in your home.

This information is based on the booklet 'Asbestos in the Home' published by the DETR (the Department of Environment, Transport and the Regions) in 1999.

Introduction

This information addresses concerns and questions about asbestos in homes. It explains what it is, where it is found, why it might be a problem and how to deal with it.

Asbestos fibres are strong and resistant to heat and chemicals. This has led to their use in a wide range of building materials and products, often as fireproofing.

Properties built since the mid-1980s are very unlikely to contain asbestos in the fabric of the building. Properties built after 1990 are extremely unlikely to contain asbestos anywhere in the building. Asbestos cement has been widely used as a cladding material and can still be found in garages and sheds.

Why may asbestos be a problem?

When asbestos materials age or become damaged they can release fibres into the air. These can be breathed deep into the lung where they may stay for a long time, causing possible damage. When very high levels of these fibres are breathed in there is a risk of lung diseases, including cancer.

People who have worked with asbestos for many years as part of their job or have washed the dusty clothing of those who worked with asbestos are most likely to be affected. Workplace regulations now protect such people.

Is everyone exposed to asbestos?

There is a very low level of fibres in the air everywhere because asbestos has been used widely. Exposure to this low level of fibres is unlikely to harm people's health.

Levels of fibres may be higher in buildings containing asbestos materials, especially where the materials are damaged. It is very unlikely that the levels of asbestos fibres found in buildings will be harmful, but if you have damaged asbestos materials in your home you should seek advice on appropriate action to take.

High, short-term exposures to asbestos fibres can occur during DIY work. For this reason, try not to raise dust when working with materials which might contain asbestos, and avoid sanding or drilling.

Where is asbestos found?

Building materials containing asbestos were widely used from 1930 to around 1980, particularly from the 1960s onwards. So houses and flats built or refurbished at this time may contain asbestos materials.

Asbestos has also been used in some heat-resistant household products, such as oven gloves and ironing boards. The use of asbestos in these products decreased greatly around the mid-1980s, and since 1993 the use of asbestos in most products has been banned.

It is not always easy to tell whether a product contains asbestos as modern asbestos-free materials often look similar - remember it is usually older products that contain asbestos.

Loft or cavity wall insulation does not contain asbestos.

The types of asbestos materials that may be found in homes are described below:

- **Insulating board**

(Asbestos content 20-45 percent.)

Insulating board has been used for fire protection, heat and sound insulation. It is particularly common in 1960s and 1970s system-built housing and is found in materials such as ducts, infill panels, ceiling tiles, wall lining, bath panels and partitions. It is unlikely to be found in buildings constructed after 1982.

- **Asbestos lagging**

(Asbestos content 55-100 percent.)

Asbestos lagging has been used for thermal insulation of pipes and boilers. It was widely used in public buildings and system-built flats during the 1960s to early 1970s in areas such as boiler houses and heating plants.

Asbestos lagging is very rarely found in homes, especially those constructed after the mid 1970s. The use of asbestos for thermal insulation was banned in 1986.

- **Sprayed coating**

(Asbestos content up to 85 percent.)

Sprayed asbestos coatings were used for fire protection of structural steel and are commonly found in system-built flats built during the 1960s. The coatings were mainly applied around the core of the building such as service ducts, lift shafts, etc.

Use stopped in 1974 and the spraying of asbestos has been prohibited since 1986. Sprayed asbestos has since been removed from many buildings, or sealed to prevent fibres being released.

- **Asbestos-cement products**

(Asbestos content mainly 10-15 percent, but sometimes up to 40 percent.)

Asbestos-cement is the most widely used asbestos material. It is found in many types of building as profiled sheets for roofing and wall-cladding, in flat sheets and partition boards for linings to walls and ceilings, in bath panels, soffit boards, fire surrounds, flue pipes, cold water tanks and as roofing tiles and slates. It has been commonly used as roofing and cladding for garages and sheds and also in guttering and drainpipes.

Use has declined since 1976, but asbestos cement is still being used, particularly in roofing and cladding products. Asbestos cement products are unlikely to release high levels of fibres because of the way they are made, unless they are subject to extreme abrasion. Damage from weathering may also release a small amount of fibres.

- **Other building materials and products**

Asbestos has been used in a variety of other building materials, for example in decorative coatings such as textured paints and plasters. These are still widely in place but supply and application has been prohibited since 1988. Plastic floor tiles, cushion flooring, roofing felts, tapes, ropes, felts and blankets can also contain asbestos.

- **Heating appliances and domestic equipment**

Asbestos was used in some warm air heating systems, electric storage heaters (up to 1976), in flameless catalytic gas heaters (up to 1988) and some early 'coal effect' gas fires.

It has also been used in domestic equipment, such as oven gloves, ironing boards, seals on cooker doors and fire blankets, and in brake linings and pads.

How can I identify products or materials containing asbestos?

Since 1976 British manufacturers have put labels on their products to show they contain asbestos, and since 1986 all products containing asbestos carry the European label.

The supplier or manufacturer of a product may be able to tell you if it contains asbestos.

Often homes built at the same time contain similar materials - your neighbours may know if surveys for asbestos have been done.

Your local council's Environmental Health Department may be able to help identify if you have asbestos products in your home, or if homes in your area have been surveyed.

Remember, asbestos-containing products can look very similar to those not containing asbestos - if in doubt SEEK ADVICE.

What should I do if I suspect there is asbestos in my home?

- **Asbestos materials in good condition that cannot readily be damaged** are often best left where they are because removal can lead to higher levels of fibres in the air for some time. Check the condition of asbestos materials from time to time to make sure they have not become damaged or started to deteriorate.

If you are planning home improvements or maintenance and have asbestos in your home, always inform builders, maintenance workers or contractors before they start work.

- **Asbestos materials that are slightly damaged** can sometimes be repaired by sealing or enclosing the material - SEEK ADVICE on the most appropriate action.
- **Asbestos materials that are badly damaged** or deteriorating can release dust and should be removed.

Some asbestos materials (sprayed asbestos, lagging or insulating boards) must always be removed by contractors with a special license issued by the Government. These licensed contractors have to follow regulations to ensure asbestos is safely removed. Your local environmental health officer should be able to provide advice on asbestos removal and licensed contractors.

Sometimes it is dangerous to have asbestos removed - for instance fire-protection materials - without replacing it with a suitable alternative.

REMEMBER:

- Avoid disturbing or damaging asbestos materials in good condition.
- If you have damaged or deteriorating asbestos materials in your home then SEEK ADVICE.
- Do not keep using oven gloves or other small items containing asbestos - dispose of them safely (see section on disposal of asbestos).
- If you think that your warm air heating system, electrical storage heating system or flameless catalytic gas heater may contain asbestos then SEEK ADVICE from your local gas or electricity supplier. If they do contain asbestos, do not attempt to dismantle these appliances yourself, but SEEK ADVICE from your the council.

Take care when doing DIY

If you have asbestos materials in your home, extra care should be taken when doing DIY. **DO NOT** attempt work involving sprayed asbestos, lagging or insulating boards, as this must be undertaken by a licensed asbestos removal contractor. If in doubt, SEEK ADVICE.

If you do any DIY with asbestos materials take the following precautions:

1. Keep other people away from the area of work.
2. Wear protective clothing (e.g. overalls), preferably disposable, and avoid breathing in asbestos dust (a disposable dust mask 'CE' marked to EN 149 with FFP2 particulate filters is recommended).
3. Keep asbestos materials wet to avoid producing dust.
4. Work outside if possible and avoid working overhead.
5. Do not drill, cut or disturb asbestos unless absolutely necessary. Do not scrape or sand asbestos materials before painting and decorating. Some types of asbestos materials are very soft and can release large numbers of fibres if rubbed or scraped.
6. Use hand tools rather than power tools.
7. Do not use a domestic vacuum cleaner to clear up the dust. Hire an industrial vacuum cleaner that conforms to BS 5415 (Type H).
8. When you have finished work, clean up and then take off the overalls carefully to avoid raising any dust which may have collected in the fabric.

In the case of disposable overalls, double-bag them, clearly mark 'ASBESTOS' on the bag and dispose of them as asbestos waste.

Wash non-disposable overalls straight away, separately from other clothing, in a washing machine.

How should I dispose of asbestos?

Wet small amounts of asbestos waste and put it in a strong plastic bag - seal this tightly and clearly mark it 'ASBESTOS'.

Do not break up large asbestos-cement sheets - they do not need to be sealed in bags but

should be wrapped in polythene or similar sheeting and disposed of as asbestos waste.

Do not put asbestos waste in the dustbin - SEEK ADVICE from the council about how to dispose of your asbestos waste.

REMEMBER:

- Avoid creating asbestos dust.
- Avoid breathing asbestos dust.
- Asbestos material in good condition should be left alone.
- If you think you may have asbestos-containing products in your house, SEEK ADVICE from the council before you take any action.