

What is Asbestos?

Asbestos is a naturally occurring fibrous mineral. Because of its unique properties, asbestos was once very attractive to industry. These properties include:

- Stability when heated
- Strength under tension
- Chemical and electrical resistance
- Suitability for weaving and reinforcement
- Water resistance or absorbency (depending on what type of asbestos).

It is estimated that one in three Australian houses built before 1983 contain a substantial amount of asbestos which has been used in over 3000 products including:

- Cement sheeting (flat, corrugated and compressed)
- Drainage and flue pipes
- Roofing, guttering and flexible building boards (eg, Villaboard, Hardiflex, etc.)

Asbestos and Your Health

When asbestos products are maintained in good condition and left undisturbed, the risk posed to your health is insignificant. It is not until the asbestos products are disturbed, weather beaten, broken, drilled, or sawed that fibres can become airborne, allowing them to be inhaled or ingested, presenting a risk to your health.

Because asbestos is naturally occurring, small amounts of its fibres can be found in the air at all times. We regularly inhale these fibres with no adverse effects to our health. The risk of asbestos having an effect on your health is dependant on the following factors:

- Concentration of fibres in the air
- Size of the fibres
- Exposure time
- Form of asbestos
- Smoking

Studies conducted by the NSW Health Department show that people who have suffered as a result of asbestos exposure generally worked in the asbestos mining or milling industry, in industries involved with making or installing asbestos products, or are from the immediate families of these people. In these situations, high levels of asbestos dust were present from either the work processes or in the clothes of the workers. These high levels of exposure were, over a number of years, at levels much higher than allowed by today's standards.

Identifying Asbestos Materials

There are two categories of asbestos material:

1 **Bonded Asbestos**

Asbestos is considered bonded when the fibres are tightly bound together, eg. A C Sheeting. If asbestos is found in its bonded form and in a location where it is unlikely to be disturbed by weathering or renovation, removal is not always the best option. Other options, such as sealing or covering it, may be used. If you are planning to work with over 10m² of this form of asbestos, you will need to employ a contractor who is licensed with WorkCover.

2 **Friable Asbestos**

This is asbestos material that can be crushed by hand pressure when in a dry state. Of the two categories, this form of asbestos presents the greatest risk to health. A person working with this form of asbestos is required to be licensed with WorkCover.

As a rule you should assume that, if the material was put in place before 1983, it contains asbestos. For positive identification, have the suspect material sampled and analysed by a NATA registered laboratory.

What should be done about Asbestos in your Home?

If you have asbestos products around your home and are concerned about the implications for your health, you need to assess whether those products are in a good condition. When in a good condition, it is unlikely that asbestos fibres will release and endanger your health, and the best option is to leave this material in its current state and keep it well maintained.

If you are renovating your house and disturbance of asbestos is inevitable, or materials containing asbestos are not in a good state of repair and need to be removed, WorkCover's minimum precautions should be followed. These are outlined below.

Council recommends that any work involving the demolition or disturbance of asbestos material be dealt with by a WorkCover-approved contractor.

Working with Asbestos Cement

WorkCover has designed standard procedures for working with asbestos cement, to safeguard the health of those working with the asbestos and others in the vicinity. A checklist of safety precautions, when working with asbestos cement products, should include:

- Wet down material to reduce the release of dust
- Wear coveralls and use an approved respirator
- Use non-powered hand tools as they generate less dust
- Work in well-ventilated areas
- Use drop sheets to collect debris
- Wet clean or only use approved HEPA vacuum-cleaning equipment. NOT HOUSEHOLD VACUUM CLEANERS.

For external work, close all windows and doors on the building. DO NOT dust, sweep, or vacuum particles suspected of containing asbestos. This will disturb tiny asbestos fibres and may make them airborne. The fibres are so small that they cannot be seen with the naked eye, and will pass through normal vacuum-cleaner filters and re-enter the air. Licensed asbestos workers use specially designed vacuum cleaners along with other safety procedures to remove asbestos dust.

WorkCover Health and Safety Guidelines must be followed by all persons working with fibro products. A copy can be gained by contacting WorkCover on 131 050 or are available on the Internet at: www.workcover.nsw.gov.au

Safe Disposal of Asbestos

Asbestos material is not accepted at Whytes Gully or Helensburgh Waste Depots. There are no approved sites for asbestos disposal within the Wollongong region. Therefore, it is important that asbestos waste is not disposed of in your normal household bin or in a standard unlined skip bin. Asbestos CANNOT be buried in your backyard or dumped at any other site that is not an approved asbestos disposal site. Heavy fines apply to people who dump or bury asbestos waste in areas other than asbestos-licensed landfills. For information on approved asbestos disposal sites contact the Department of Environment, Climate Change and Water on (02) 9995 5000.

Approved Contractors

Contractors who are working with over 10m² of bonded asbestos or any type of friable asbestos need to be licensed with WorkCover. To verify that a contractor is approved, contact WorkCover's Asbestos Demolition Hotline on telephone (02) 8260 5885.

Disclaimer

This information was believed to be correct at the date of its approval and is for general information purposes only.