

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. Asbestos has also been 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 and commercial buildings, and as part of the infrastructure of our cities.

Which health problems can asbestos cause?

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 apparent when many workers who experienced prolonged exposure to air-borne asbestos fibres became ill.

Asbestos poses no risk to your health if it is intact and not releasing fibres into the air.

Who is at risk?

In recent years, there has been great public concern about asbestos. Schools and offices have closed, and many efforts made to remove asbestos from public buildings.

Asbestos poses very little threat to health in most circumstances. In fact, 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 probably *do* have asbestos insulation wrapped around your furnace ducts or pipes, as well as in your floor tiles and other areas.

Keep in mind that asbestos does not cause any risk to your health if it is in good condition. Asbestos poses a potential health threat 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 deteriorating, then the easiest plan is to cover it up. Buy a roll of duct tape and do a complete rewrap of any areas that are no longer completely intact. Once the work is done, take extra care to contain any dust with a wet-wiped, 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 room air.

To protect against asbestos fibres, you should wear a face mask, disposable coveralls, and gloves.

Keep in mind that 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 play it safe. You can have a sample of the material tested for asbestos. Look in the Yellow Pages under Laboratories for Analytical Services or Environmental Services.

If you find asbestos that is fraying or crumbling in your home, you might want to remove it entirely. Look in the Yellow Pages under Asbestos Abatement for professional contractors who specialize in this service.

They should use methods that will remove asbestos dust and dispose of the material properly.

If you are renovating an older house, you should 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 an expert opinion before starting the renovation.

Summary:

- Asbestos is only a health risk when it has frayed or deteriorated, thus releasing fibres into the air.
- Extensive testing shows that the usual level of asbestos inside buildings is very low and does not pose a health threat.
- If you have frayed or deteriorating asbestos, wrap it with duct tape rather than trying to remove it.
- Homes built in 1980 or newer should not contain asbestos.

For more information visit the [BC Ministry of Water, Land, and Air Protection](#) Web site,

or contact your local environmental health officer.

For more BC HealthFile topics visit www.bchealthguide.org/healthfiles/index.stm, or visit your local public health unit.

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