Asbestos

What is asbestos?

Asbestos is the name given to a group of naturally occurring mineral fibres that were used extensively in many products due to their strength, insulating features and resistance to fire. The most common asbestos types used in Australia were chrysotile (white asbestos), amosite (brown asbestos) and crocidolite (blue asbestos).

Chrysotile was used until 2003 in products such as brake linings, paint and insulation. Amosite and crocidolite were used until the mid-1980s, most commonly in building materials (e.g. asbestos cement products, also known as 'fibro' and 'AC' sheeting). During the 1960s and 1970s, pure loose-fill asbestos was sold by local company, Mr Fluffy, and pumped directly into roof spaces as ceiling insulation.

How do I know if a material contains asbestos?

The age of a product does not always indicate whether it may contain asbestos. Most building products containing asbestos were banned in the mid-1980s. However, chrysotile asbestos products continued to be used in plant rooms and other equipment until the 2003 national ban on all asbestos.

It is usually not possible to determine whether a material contains asbestos simply by looking at it. The only way to be sure if a material contains asbestos is to have a licensed asbestos assessor do an assessment. This may involve taking samples for testing to identify asbestos. If asbestos is present, the assessor can provide advice about managing it. For more information about asbestos assessment services, visit the Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate or WorkSafe ACT.

What are the health effects of asbestos exposure?

Asbestos is a risk to health when it is inhaled (breathed in). The risk to health increases with the number of asbestos fibres a person inhales during their life. When asbestos dust is inhaled, larger fibres tend to be cleared by protective mechanisms in the lungs and upper respiratory tract. The finer fibres are more difficult to remove and may become trapped in the lungs or move further into the body.

There are a number of diseases that can be related to the inhalation of asbestos fibres. These include pleural plaques (thickening of tissue around the lungs), asbestosis (scarring of lung tissue), lung cancer, and mesothelioma (cancer that can affect the lining of the lungs and intestine). Smoking increases the risk of developing lung cancer following exposure to asbestos.

Diseases related to the inhalation of asbestos fibres can take a long time to develop after initial exposure to asbestos (i.e. usually 20 to 30 years after the first exposure). Most people who develop asbestos related disease have had significant exposure to either a large number of fibres or frequent exposure.

Only a qualified medical practitioner can provide an assessment of an individual's circumstances and exposure risks.

What is the risk of being exposed to asbestos?

The major sources of environmental exposure are from bonded asbestos-cement building products and asbestos fibres in drinking water (e.g. in rainwater collected from an asbestos-cement roof).

When in good condition, bonded asbestos products do not normally release any asbestos fibres into the air and are considered a low risk for people who are in contact with them. However, if the material is damaged or disturbed, fibres may be released into the air. The use of power tools for cutting, drilling, grinding, sanding, or sawing the material can release significant numbers of fibres as dust. This dust is very fine and easily inhaled. The use of high pressure water blasters to clean asbestos-containing material prior to painting can also release large numbers of asbestos fibres.

The fibres from loose-fill asbestos insulation are very fine and can move into living areas through cracks or holes in walls and ceilings. The only way to know whether asbestos fibres have moved into living areas is to have an asbestos assessment undertaken by a licensed professional. Further details about loose-fill asbestos can be found in the Health information for households with Mr Fluffy asbestos insulation information sheet.

Disposal of asbestos material

Asbestos is classified as a hazardous material, so there are strict guidelines about how it should be packaged, transported and where it can be disposed. Information about disposal of asbestos material can be found at: Worksafe.ACT.gov.au

Further information about asbestos

- A broad range of information relating to asbestos can be found at the Worksafe ACT website Worksafe.ACT.gov.au.
- The Australian Government Asbestos Safety and Eradication Agency https://www.asbestossafety.gov.au/ assists householders to reduce the risks associated with exposure to asbestos fibres.
- The Loose Fill Asbestos Coordination Team asbestossafety.gov.au coordinates the Loose Fill Asbestos Eradication Scheme.
- For further public health information, please contact the Health Protection Service on 02 5124 9700 or email hps@act.gov.au.

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