



# Asbestos safety for householders and home renovators

This guide provides information about where you might find asbestos, the laws that relate to asbestos management and removal and how to protect yourself, your family and your neighbours from exposure to harmful asbestos fibres.



# ASBESTOS SAFETY



## Was your house built or renovated before 1990?



**If the answer is yes, your house probably has some asbestos.**

This is something you need to be aware of before you start doing any repairs, maintenance or improvements to your home, even if all you want to do is drill into a wall to install a shelf.

Asbestos was used in a wide range of building materials and other products prior to being phased out by 1990 and banned in 2003. It is still present in millions of homes and public and commercial buildings.

## Why is asbestos a problem?

**Asbestos is known to cause cancer.**

When microscopic asbestos fibres are inhaled, they can cause diseases such as lung cancer, and other diseases which have no cure like mesothelioma and asbestosis. All of these asbestos-related diseases contribute to approximately 4000 deaths in Australia each year.

**You don't need a lot of exposure to asbestos fibres to develop a fatal disease later in life.**

Without taking the right precautions, asbestos fibres can also contaminate your clothing and furnishings in your home, risking not only your own health, but that of your family.



### MYTH

You need to work with asbestos all the time for it to be harmful.

Some people who develop an asbestos-related disease can only identify one exposure in their past. Others who were regularly exposed to airborne asbestos fibres do not become ill.



# When is asbestos harmful?

Asbestos can be in a **friable** or **non-friable** form in products.



**FRIABLE:** flaky, powdery, can be broken up easily with your fingers. Can be found in sprayed insulation and asbestos felt vinyl backing. It is extremely hazardous because the fine asbestos fibres can be easily released into the air and inhaled.



**NON-FRIABLE:** bonded securely as part of another compound, often cement. Can be found as part of cement sheets, adhesive substances or materials like fibro. It is not dangerous if in good condition. It can be hazardous when disturbed, damaged or deteriorating as asbestos fibres can be released.

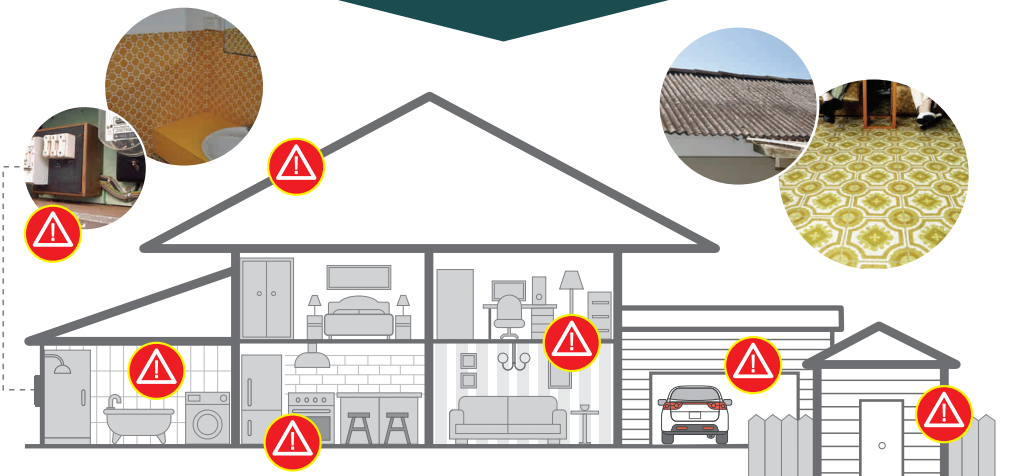
## Where can you find asbestos?

### Inside the home

- wall and ceiling panels & sheeting, particularly in wet areas such as the kitchen, bathroom, toilet & laundry
- backing for wall tiles & splashbacks, carpet underlay
- plaster patching compounds and textured paint
- vinyl floor tiles, felt backing for vinyl and linoleum flooring
- insulation in domestic heaters, stoves, roof cavities and around hot water pipes

### Outside the home

- roof sheeting and ridge capping
- gutters, downpipes, gables & eaves/soffits, as well as the lining under eaves
- electrical switchboards
- water pipes and flues
- cladding for walls, including imitation brick cladding
- fencing, carports, garages, outhouses and garden sheds



## How can I tell if something is asbestos?

**You cannot tell if a material contains asbestos just by looking at it.**

Only scientific testing<sup>1</sup> of a sample can confirm this.

Asbestos professionals who can assist with identifying asbestos include:

- occupational hygienists who have experience with asbestos
- licensed asbestos assessors and removalists
- Individuals who have undertaken a recognised training course in asbestos identification.

**Always check if asbestos is present before you start doing any repairs, maintenance or home improvements:**

- ask an asbestos professional for advice and have a sample tested, or
- assume the material contains asbestos & take the necessary precautions.

If the asbestos material is in good condition do not disturb or damage it.

If it is broken, weathered or if any renovation or maintenance work is likely to disturb or damage the asbestos, seek professional help to remove it.

**It could cost less than you think.**



## What do the laws require?

You have legal responsibilities under **common law** and **public health laws** to protect the health of others as well as yourself and your family. This means that you must take all necessary precautions to prevent or minimise exposure to asbestos fibres.

Under **environmental protection laws** it is an offence to pollute the environment with asbestos waste or to unlawfully dispose of asbestos waste. For example, you could be fined for placing asbestos waste in a domestic rubbish bin. All asbestos waste must be disposed of at a landfill site licensed to accept asbestos waste.

Any tradesperson, handyman or contractor that you hire to carry out repairs, maintenance or other work on your home must comply with **work health and safety (WHS) laws**. They must follow strict safety procedures and are not allowed to remove asbestos unless:

1. they have an **asbestos removal licence**; or
2. the amount being removed is less than 10m<sup>2</sup> non-friable asbestos<sup>2</sup> and they:
  - are **trained** in asbestos identification, safe handling and control measures
  - use the **right tools and equipment**, and
  - follow **safe removal, decontamination and disposal** methods.

<sup>1</sup> Testing by a laboratory accredited by National Association of Testing Authorities (NATA)

<sup>2</sup> 10m<sup>2</sup> of non-friable asbestos is equivalent to about four sheets of asbestos cement wall sheeting or one wall of an average size bathroom.

There are two classes of licensed asbestos removalist:<sup>3</sup>

- Class A: authorised to remove all types of asbestos
- Class B: authorised to remove only non-friable asbestos materials

In the Australian Capital Territory home owners and tradespersons are not allowed to remove any amount of asbestos material themselves – it must be removed by a licensed asbestos removalist.

In Queensland, home owners must undertake training to remove non-friable asbestos greater than 10m<sup>2</sup>. Friable asbestos must be removed by a Class A licensed asbestos removalist.

## Maintenance tasks

When carrying out minor repairs or maintenance on your home, always take care to avoid disturbing or releasing asbestos fibres. Maintain asbestos materials in good condition by using paint or other sealants, enclosures and capping.

Never use high-pressure water or any abrasive process (e.g. scrubbing, sanding or grinding) to clean asbestos cement roofs or any other asbestos material. This can result in widespread contamination and an expensive clean-up.

If you plan to cut a small hole into an asbestos-cement sheet, for example to install a cable, only use a hand saw or hand drill (or low-speed battery drill) and contain or capture any asbestos dust as close to the source as possible. You must also wear suitable personal protective equipment.



**Always use work practices that will prevent or minimise the release of asbestos fibres into the air.**

- Do not use brooms or brushes to dry-sweep asbestos containing dust
- Do not use high-speed power tools to cut, grind, sand or drill asbestos materials
- Do not use high pressure water or compressed air to clean asbestos materials



<sup>3</sup> In WA Class A is called "unrestricted" and Class B is called "restricted"

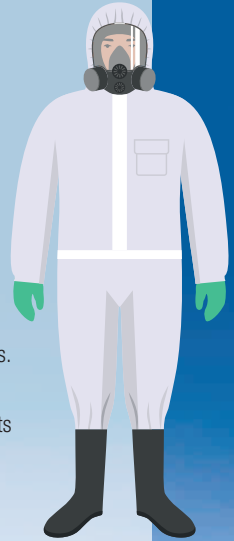
# Asbestos removal

**Like plumbing and electrical work, asbestos removal is a job best left to the experts.**

A licensed asbestos removalist has the training and the equipment needed for the safe handling, removal and disposal of asbestos. They are also comprehensively insured to cover any incidents as a result of work involving asbestos.

When you hire a person to remove asbestos for you, ask them for information on their **license**, their **insurances** and **how they will carry out the work** to protect you and your family from exposure to asbestos fibres.

A licensed asbestos removalist will usually include the cost of disposing the asbestos waste legally with the cost of removal. Licensed asbestos removalists are listed on your Work Health and Safety Regulator's website (WorkSafe or SafeWork in your state or territory).



# What steps must be followed to remove asbestos?



It is not recommended that you handle or remove asbestos yourself. It is easier, safer and often cheaper to get a professional to do the job for you.

If you decide to remove asbestos material yourself, you need to plan the whole job before you start – from getting equipment and setting up the work area, to clean up and final disposal of waste.

Get everything ready before you start the job, because once you are contaminated you need to be able to step straight into the decontamination area. You also need to prevent the rest of your home from becoming contaminated.

Send the kids, pets and other household members out for the day while you are working, and don't work on a particularly windy day.

This checklist will help you with the things you need to do.

## STEP 1

### Step 1: Get the right equipment

- Personal protective equipment (PPE) – disposable coveralls, disposable gloves, a tight fitting Class P2 respirator and fully enclosed shoes without laces that can be easily cleaned.
- Plastic sheeting (new, minimum 200 micrometres ( $\mu\text{m}$ ) thick polythene) and duct tape
- Bolt cutters (for sheets bolted in place).
- Access to a garden hose with a fine spray nozzle or a spray bottle containing a wetting agent (water, or water with detergent).
- Bucket of water and disposable rags.
- Solid asbestos-waste container, that is labelled appropriately.
- Asbestos waste bags (new, labelled, 200  $\mu\text{m}$  thick polythene plastic).
- Hire a Class H vacuum cleaner with high efficiency particulate air (HEPA) filters for cleaning up dust.



### MYTH

All I need to remove small amounts of asbestos is a P2 respirator and coveralls.

While wearing the right protective gear is important, it is not enough to fully protect you and others from asbestos. There is a lot of other equipment and specific methods that you must use to prevent asbestos contaminating everything around you. In many circumstances it is easier and safer to engage a licensed professional to remove the asbestos for you.





## STEP

### 2

#### Step 2: Plan and prepare the work area

- Prepare a clean area with all the equipment you need for the job and a dirty area with all the rags and wipes you need for decontamination.
  - Identify an asbestos disposal facility, their opening hours and their requirements for asbestos disposal.
  - Check the environmental laws regarding transport of asbestos.
  - Check the weather for outdoor work – windy days will spread any asbestos dust so reschedule any work.
  - Prepare the work area –
    - remove any portable electrical or gas items
    - cover all electrical or gas outlets with taped plastic.  
NOTE: water used to wet down the area may cause an electrocution hazard.
    - shut off the electricity or seek help from an electrician
    - seal off the work area by using plastic sheeting and remove anything that could become contaminated with asbestos fibres, including rugs, kitchen and bathroom items and soft furnishings
    - cover all vents and turn off air-conditioning and fans, and
    - cover the floor or ground with heavy-duty 200 µm (minimum) polythene plastic sheeting.
  - Prepare a storage area for waste – a trailer or skip that can be covered for transport and disposal.
  - Inform your neighbours of the proposed work and ask them to close doors and windows while the work is being undertaken.
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## STEP

### 3

#### Step 3: Remove the asbestos safely

- Thoroughly wet down the material before you start and at regular intervals during the removal process by lightly spraying surfaces with water, or with water mixed with detergent, or with a PVA solution. Use water from a low-pressure garden hose if working outdoors.
- Pull out any nails first to loosen asbestos material without breaking it.
- If sheets are bolted in place, dampen and cut the bolts while avoiding contact with the asbestos material. Remove the bolts or fixings slowly without damaging the asbestos and place them in the asbestos-waste container.
- Carefully lower large pieces of asbestos material to the ground – do not drop them – and stack them on two layers of plastic sheeting so they do not break.
- Place small pieces of asbestos debris in an asbestos-waste container.
- Double-wrap large pieces of asbestos material in plastic sheeting (minimum 200 µm thick) and seal all openings securely with duct tape.
- Label all wrapped or bagged asbestos waste.

# STEP

## 4

### Step 4: Decontaminate

Even if you don't appear dirty after working with asbestos, you still need to decontaminate. Decontamination of the work area and tools can be done in two ways:

- **wet decontamination** (or 'wet wiping') uses disposable rags to wipe contaminated surfaces. Rags must not be re-wetted in the bucket or the water will be considered contaminated and therefore becomes asbestos waste. All used rags are asbestos-contaminated waste.
- **dry decontamination** involves rolling/folding up and sealing contaminated sheeting or using an asbestos-grade Class H HEPA filtered vacuum cleaner.

Tools that are used in an asbestos area must be either:

- disposed of as asbestos-contaminated waste, or
- decontaminated, double-bagged and labelled for transport to another asbestos area.

Before any PPE is removed, it should be thoroughly vacuumed and also wet wiped in the case of footwear. Remove the respirator last and dispose with other asbestos waste.

Once the asbestos material has been removed, inspect the whole work area to ensure it has been cleaned properly and there is no visible sign of asbestos dust.

Shower and wash your hair immediately afterwards to remove any dust that may be on your body.

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# STEP

## 5

### Step 5: Dispose of asbestos waste legally

All asbestos waste must be disposed of safely, including anything contaminated with asbestos dust such as PPE and clean-up rags. You must:

- Keep the asbestos material wet until it is wrapped and sealed, or bagged.
- Wrap the material (including any offcuts or contaminated items) in two layers of 200 µm plastic sheeting or double-bag in asbestos waste bags.
- Completely seal the packages with adhesive tape.
- Put asbestos warning stickers on the outside of the packages or bags, or clearly label the packages or bags ASBESTOS WASTE using a permanent marker pen.
- Store packaged asbestos waste in a solid, secure and clearly labelled waste bin or skip until removed.
- Ensure the packaged asbestos waste is transported securely and disposed at a designated asbestos-waste disposal facility as soon as possible after removal. Visit [www.asbestossafety.gov.au/search-disposal-facilities](http://www.asbestossafety.gov.au/search-disposal-facilities) to find your nearest licensed facility.

# Dealing with asbestos after fire and natural disasters



Asbestos materials are often damaged during house fires and natural disasters such as floods, cyclones and bushfires, and may contaminate the area around the property. It is important that you:

- Follow instructions from emergency and clean up personnel as they are designed to specifically prevent unnecessary exposure to asbestos fibres from damaged materials.
- Do not enter your property until you are advised that it is safe.
- Wear a P2 face mask and protective clothing (such as sturdy boots and gloves) – whether you believe asbestos may be present or not.
- Keep children (and animals) clear of the site.
- Do not bury building rubble as it may contain hazardous materials including asbestos.
- Don't spread ash and debris around your property – moisten the ash with water to minimise dust and keep damp but do not use high pressure water sprays.
- Put up warning signs or temporary fencing to keep people out of the area until all hazardous materials have been removed.

**Even if you follow all the safety procedures to remove asbestos yourself, it is much safer and easier to engage a licensed asbestos removalist who is fully trained, insured and equipped to prevent or minimise exposure to asbestos. It often works out cheaper, too!**

**www.**  
**asbestos**safety  
**.gov.au**



## **Further information:**

State and territory governments have dedicated asbestos information websites:

Queensland - [www.asbestos.qld.gov.au](http://www.asbestos.qld.gov.au)

NSW - [www.asbestos.nsw.gov.au](http://www.asbestos.nsw.gov.au)

SA - [www.asbestos.sa.gov.au](http://www.asbestos.sa.gov.au)

Victoria - [www.asbestos.vic.gov.au](http://www.asbestos.vic.gov.au)

Tasmania - [www.worksafe.tas.gov.au/asbestos-safety](http://www.worksafe.tas.gov.au/asbestos-safety)

NT - [www.asbestos.nt.gov.au](http://www.asbestos.nt.gov.au)

WA - <https://www.healthywa.wa.gov.au/asbestos>

ACT - [www.asbestos.act.gov.au](http://www.asbestos.act.gov.au)