

Asbestos FACTSheet



What Is Asbestos?

- Asbestos is a mineral fiber. It can be positively identified only with a special type of microscope. There are several types of asbestos fibers. In the past, asbestos was added to a variety of products to strengthen them and to provide heat insulation and fire resistance.

How Can Asbestos Affect My Health?

From studies of people who were exposed to asbestos in factories and shipyards, we know that breathing high levels of asbestos fibers can lead to an increased risk of:

- Lung cancer;
- Mesothelioma, a cancer of the lining of the chest and the abdominal cavity; and
- Asbestosis, in which the lungs become scarred with fibrous tissue.

The risk of lung cancer and Mesothelioma increases with the number of fibers inhaled. The risk of lung cancer from inhaling asbestos fibers is also greater if you smoke. People who get asbestosis have usually been exposed to high levels of asbestos for a long time. The symptoms of these diseases do not usually appear until about 20 to 30 years after the first exposure to asbestos.

Where Can I Find Asbestos And When Can It Be A Problem?

Most products made today do not contain asbestos. Those few products made which still contain asbestos that could be inhaled are required to be labeled as such. However, until the 1970s, many types of building products and insulation materials used in homes contained asbestos. Common products that might have contained asbestos in the past, and conditions which may release fibers, include:

- STEAM PIPES, BOILERS, and FURNACE DUCTS insulated with an asbestos blanket or asbestos paper tape. These materials may release asbestos fibers if damaged, repaired, or removed improperly.
- RESILIENT FLOOR TILES (vinyl asbestos, asphalt, and rubber), the backing on VINYL SHEET FLOORING, and ADHESIVES used for installing floor tile. Sanding tiles can release fibers. So may scraping or sanding the backing of sheet flooring during removal.
- CEMENT SHEET, MILLBOARD, and PAPER used as insulation around furnaces and woodburning stoves. Repairing or removing appliances may release asbestos fibers. So may cutting, tearing, sanding, drilling or sawing insulation.
- SOUNDPROOFING OR DECORATIVE MATERIAL sprayed on walls and ceilings. Loose, crumbly, or water-damaged material may release fibers. So will sanding, drilling or scraping the material

- PATCHING AND JOINT COMPOUNDS for walls and ceilings, and TEXTURED PAINTS. Sanding, scraping, or drilling these surfaces may release asbestos
- ASBESTOS CEMENT ROOFING, SHINGLES, and SIDING. These products are not likely to release asbestos fibers unless sawed, drilled or cut.

Examples of Where Asbestos Hazards May Be Found In The Home

- Some roofing and siding shingles are made of asbestos cement.
- Houses built between 1930 and 1950 may have asbestos as insulation.
- Attic and wall insulation produced using vermiculite ore. Asbestos may be present in textured paint and in patching compounds used on wall and ceiling joints. Their use was banned in 1977.
- Artificial ashes and embers sold for use in gas-fired fireplaces may contain asbestos
- Walls and floors around woodburning stoves may be protected with asbestos paper, millboard, or cement sheets
- Asbestos is found in some vinyl floor tiles and the backing on vinyl sheet flooring and adhesives.
- Hot water and steam pipes in older houses may be coated with an asbestos material or covered with an asbestos blanket or tape.

Asbestos Do's And Don'ts for the Homeowner

- Do keep activities to a minimum in any areas having damaged material that may contain asbestos.
- Do take every precaution to avoid damaging asbestos material.
- Do have removal and major repair done by people trained and qualified in handling asbestos. It is highly recommended that sampling and minor repair also be done by asbestos professionals.
- Don't dust, sweep, or vacuum debris that may contain asbestos.
- Don't saw, sand, scrape, or drill holes in asbestos materials.
- Don't use abrasive pads or brushes or power strippers to strip wax from asbestos flooring. Never use a power stripper on a dry floor.
- Don't sand or try to level asbestos flooring or its backing. When asbestos flooring needs replacing, install new floor covering over it, if possible.

Major repairs must be done only by a professional trained in methods for safely handling asbestos.

Minor repairs should also be done by professionals since there is always a risk of exposure to fibers when asbestos is disturbed.

Doing minor repairs yourself is not recommended since improper handling of asbestos materials can create a hazard where none existed.

For more information on asbestos in other consumer products, call the CPSC Hotline or write to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, Washington, DC 20207. The CPSC Hotline has information on certain appliances and products, such as the brands and models of hair dryers that contain asbestos.

Call CPSC at 1-800-638-CPSC. A teletypewriter (TTY) for the hearing impaired is available at 1-800-638-8270. The Maryland TTY number is 1-800-492-8104.