

## Asbestos in the Home — Commonly Asked Questions

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Asbestos may be present in many materials in your home. It may be found in older home insulations and floor coverings, and in older electrical equipment such as fuse boxes, lamp socket collars and receptacle boxes. Asbestos is hazardous if it can be crushed by hand pressure and its surface is not sealed. Without sealing its surface, small fibers may escape and enter your lungs.

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### Q. What is asbestos and why is it a health concern?

A. Asbestos is a naturally occurring mineral that separates into strong, very fine fibers. Since the fibers are heat-resistant and durable, asbestos often has been used in construction and industry. Asbestos fibers are up to 1,200 times thinner than a human hair. These fibers can float in the air for a long time and easily be breathed into the lungs. The fibers can remain in the lungs for many years and cause asbestos-related diseases. It can be 10 to 30 years after exposure before any symptoms of disease appear. **There is no known safe level of exposure to asbestos.**

### Q. How can I identify asbestos?

A. Plumbers, contractors and heating specialists who work with asbestos-containing material often can tell by looking at it, whether or not a material contains asbestos. However, for most of us, the only way to identify asbestos is to have a sample of the suspect material analyzed by a laboratory. Laboratories that do this work usually can be found in the telephone yellow pages under the "Asbestos - Consulting and Testing" listing. If you think a material might contain asbestos, don't guess. Treat it as though it does contain asbestos until you have it sampled and analyzed.

### Q. How do I take a sample?

A. It is important that you don't release fibers into the air or on yourself when taking a sample. Spray the material with a fine mist of water first. Trying not to disturb it any more than necessary, penetrate the depth of the dampened material with a clean sample container such as a small plastic or glass vial. When you have the sample in the container, tightly seal it. Clean up any material on the outside of the container or that spilled on the floor, using a damp paper towel. Label the container with an identification number and indicate when and where you took the sample. If you suspect asbestos in several different places or in a large surface area, take several samples to ensure accuracy.

### Q. If I do find asbestos in my home, what should I do?

A. Even if the asbestos-containing material in your home has deteriorated, there's a good chance that the problem can be taken care of by repair instead of removal. Removal is the last option since it involves disturbing the material and possibly sending more fibers into the air. If it is necessary to repair an asbestos-containing item or when it is necessary to remove asbestos-containing material such as ceiling finish or pipe insulation, a professional with special training in the asbestos field should be consulted. Call the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) at 651-297-8685 or 800-657-3864 for a list of licensed contractors. The professional should have, among other specific equipment, vacuum machines specially designed to filter out the asbestos fibers. Standard household or industrial vacuum cleaners will only scatter the fibers, making the situation worse.

Before signing a contract with an asbestos removal specialist, get references from the contractor's former customers. You also may want to check with the MPCA to see if we have received complaints about or found violations of regulations by the prospective contractor.

## **Q. What is involved in asbestos repair?**

**A.** In dealing with pipe, furnace and boiler insulation, if the insulation material moves when you touch it, or the cover is no longer firm, the insulation is probably too deteriorated to repair. Call a professional.

For areas with minor damage, you can obtain commercial products from safety equipment stores to fill holes and seal damaged areas. Repair by the homeowner should only be attempted, if at all, where the insulation is firm and the cover tight, with a minimum of holes or tears.

Sprayed on asbestos-containing material on walls and ceilings should not be disturbed by the homeowner. If the material hasn't been painted, a coat of "penetrating encapsulant," a thin liquid which soaks in and sets hard like a plastic, can be sprayed on with an airless sprayer to seal the surface. The encapsulant will, however, make any future removal more difficult. A bridging encapsulant, such as a light coat of latex base paint can be used if the material has previously had an encapsulant applied. Don't build up so thick a coat that the weight will increase the chances of the treated material falling. If the surface is stable and sealed, the material is considered safe until damaged.

## **Q. If I suspect asbestos fibers have gotten into the air, what should I do?**

**A.** If the area is large, close off the room or portion of the house in which the fibers may be present. Close off any passages of escape such as air ducts, windows or door drafts. Contact a trained professional or a local health authority. Samples of dust and debris as well as air samples should be taken and analyzed by a laboratory.

## **Q. What about dealing with asbestos in major home remodeling or dismantling projects?**

**A.** Depending upon the amount of asbestos in your home, you may be required to notify the Minnesota Department of Health and/or MPCA before you begin any work. They will want to know the extent of the work involved and your plans for the asbestos removal and disposal.

## **Q. What specific requirements are there for asbestos disposal?**

**A.** The law says that "no visible emissions" of dust are allowed during the removal, transportation, and disposal of asbestos-containing material. All asbestos waste and material used in the cleanup, including disposable clothing, filters, equipment and building materials must be disposed of as asbestos waste. The material must be in double 6-mil plastic bags, labeled as asbestos and hauled to an approved asbestos landfill in a covered vehicle and disposed of in accordance with EPA, state and local regulations. Do not place asbestos-containing materials in your household trash. The MPCA can give you the location of a landfill approved for asbestos disposal. Remember, as a homeowner, you are legally responsible for the safe disposal of the material at an approved landfill, even though you have hired someone else to do the work for you.

## **Q. Where might I find asbestos in my home?**

**A.** Older wall and ceiling insulation in homes built between 1930 and 1950 are common places to find asbestos. Floor coverings, such as sheet vinyl, vinyl tile and vinyl adhesive may all contain asbestos. These materials are generally considered safe unless damaged or disturbed. Sprayed-on or trowelled-on surface material on wall and ceiling surfaces may contain asbestos. If the material is hard and firmly attached and unless it produces powder or dust by hand pressure, it shouldn't be hazardous.

Cement asbestos board (called CAB, or by the trade name Transite™ has been used as sheets for straight and lap siding and has been cut and shaped as a substitute for wood shingles. Since this material is mainly outside the home and bound in a hard material, it presents little hazard unless disturbed.

Other potential sources include older electrical equipment such as lamp socket collars, switch and receptacle boxes, fuse boxes and old-fashioned "knob and tube" wiring. You may also find asbestos in the insulation blankets of older ovens, dishwashers, freezers and water heaters. If these materials remain in place, they shouldn't pose a hazard.

## **Q. What about lung cancer?**

**A.** Most cases of asbestos-related lung cancer occur among people who smoke and were exposed to asbestos. People who smoke and are exposed to asbestos have an increased risk of lung cancer **fifty to ninety times** greater than people who don't smoke and aren't exposed to asbestos.