
Guidance on Asbestos in the Home

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GUIDANCE ON ASBESTOS IN THE HOME

1 INTRODUCTION

This guide is intended to enable householders to understand asbestos issues and make informed decisions how best to deal with asbestos in the home.

ARCA does not encourage DIY removal of asbestos products, as the implications of disturbing asbestos can be very serious.

This guide gives a brief indication of the levels of risk posed by different types of asbestos products. If, after considering the risks of asbestos, householders decide to carry out DIY removal of any asbestos product, they are advised to read this document and the other sources of information.

Please note that ARCA will be unable to provide detailed advice to householders regarding domestic asbestos, due to the need to physically assess condition and potential for fibre release when managing asbestos materials.

If householders require further information, it is recommended that they seek professional advice from a company offering such services. A list of Asbestos Testing and Consultancy (ATaC) association members can be found at www.atac.org.uk. The Asbestos Removal Contractors Association (ARCA) maintains a list of members who are HSE licensed asbestos removal contractors at www.arca.org.uk

Local Councils may well have their own asbestos policy relating to Council Housing. Council tenants should not remove any asbestos from the structure of buildings but should contact their Local Council for advice.

2 WHAT IS ASBESTOS?

Asbestos is a naturally occurring mineral of which there are 3 main types of fibres, chrysotile (white), amosite (brown), and crocidolite (blue).

Asbestos products are only dangerous when damaged, worn or disturbed because they can release dust into the air. Asbestos dust is made up of tiny fibres which, if breathed in, are harmful and can cause eventual damage to the lungs many years after the first exposure. Asbestos has been used in many types of products: the ease of fibre release varies a great deal between these products.

Asbestos fibres are so small that they can be disturbed very easily; this will not be visible to the naked eye. Domestic vacuum cleaners cannot be used to clean up asbestos dust, as the filters are not fine enough to capture harmful asbestos fibres.

The level of exposure at which asbestos fibres cause ill health is not known, what is known is that the more asbestos dust a person is exposed to the greater the risk. It is therefore essential to keep the release of asbestos dust to a minimum.

Remember the dust is harmful so asbestos products should always be handled carefully.

3 WHY IS ASBESTOS A PROBLEM?

When asbestos materials age or become damaged they can release fibres into the air. These can be breathed deep into the lung where they may stay for a long time, causing possible damage. When very high levels of these fibres are breathed in there is a risk of lung diseases, including cancer. People who have worked with asbestos for many years as part of their job or have washed the dusty clothing of those who worked with asbestos are most likely to be affected.

Due to the risks associated with asbestos exposure, asbestos work is subject to very strict regulatory control. Workplace regulations will apply to trades people working on asbestos in your property: they are legally required to have sufficient training, equipment and work methods to carry out the work in a way that will prevent exposure. In many work situations, organisations also need permission (i.e. a licence to work with asbestos) from the Health and Safety Executive to work with asbestos.

4 IS EVERYONE EXPOSED TO ASBESTOS?

There are asbestos fibres in the air everywhere, because asbestos has been used widely and it is a naturally occurring mineral. Exposure to this low 'background' fibre level is unlikely to harm people's health: significant risk of asbestos-related ill health is associated with cumulative 'doses' of substantial exposures over a period of time. Fibre levels may be higher in buildings containing asbestos materials, especially where the materials are damaged. If you have damaged asbestos materials in your home, you should seek advice on appropriate action to take. High, short-term exposures to asbestos fibres could occur during any DIY work.

5 WHERE MIGHT I FIND ASBESTOS?

Asbestos is used in a multitude of materials that can be found in and around many homes. Building materials containing asbestos were widely used from 1930 to around 1980, particularly from the 1960s onwards. So houses and flats built or refurbished at this time may contain asbestos materials.

Asbestos has also been used in some heat-resistant household products, such as oven gloves and ironing boards. The use of asbestos in these products decreased greatly around the mid-1980s, and since 1993 the use of asbestos in most products was banned, with a final ban on the use of asbestos in all products coming into force in 1999.

It is not always easy to tell whether a product contains asbestos, as modern asbestos-free materials often look similar - remember it is usually older products that contain asbestos.

The types of asbestos materials that may be found in homes are described below:

Asbestos Insulating Board (AIB) - Asbestos content 20-45 percent

Asbestos Insulating board has been used for fire protection, heat and sound insulation. It is particularly common in 1960s and 1970s system-built housing and is found in materials such as ducts, infill panels, ceiling tiles, wall lining, bath panels and partitions. Asbestos insulation Board is used in some warm air heating systems and also for lining cupboards which house the central heating unit. Certain storage heaters may also contain asbestos material. There are several modern substitutes which are now used as an alternative to asbestos boarding. It is unlikely to be found in buildings constructed after 1982.

Asbestos lagging - Asbestos content 55-100 percent

Asbestos lagging has been used for thermal insulation of pipes and boilers. It was widely used in public buildings and system-built flats during the 1960s to early 1970s in areas such as boiler houses and heating plants. Asbestos lagging is very rarely found in homes, especially those constructed after the mid-1970s. The use of asbestos for thermal insulation was banned in 1986.

Sprayed Coating - Asbestos content up to 85 percent

Sprayed asbestos coatings were used for fire protection of structural steel and are commonly found in system-built flats built during the 1960s. The coatings were mainly applied around the core of the building, such as service ducts, lift shafts, etc. Use stopped in 1974 and the spraying of asbestos has been prohibited since 1986. Sprayed asbestos has since been removed from many buildings, or sealed to prevent fibres being released.

NOTE: Disturbance of insulation board, lagging or sprayed asbestos is liable to generate very high levels of asbestos fibre; it should be carried out by HSE licenced asbestos contractors.

Asbestos-cement products - Asbestos content mainly 10-15 percent, but sometimes up to 40 percent

Asbestos-cement is the most widely used asbestos material. It is found in many types of building as profiled sheets for roofing and wall-cladding, in flat sheets and partition boards for linings to walls and ceilings, in bath panels, soffit boards, fire surrounds, flue pipes, cold water tanks and as roofing tiles and slates. It has been commonly used as roofing and cladding for garages and sheds and also in guttering and drainpipes.

Asbestos cement products are unlikely to release high fibre levels because of the way they are made, unless they are subject to extreme abrasion.

NOTE: Trades people would not need a 'licence' to handle products containing asbestos cement.

Other building materials and products

Asbestos has been used in a variety of other building materials, for example in decorative coatings such as textured paints and plasters. These are still widely in place but supply and application has been prohibited since 1988. Plastic floor tiles, cushion flooring, roofing felts, tapes, ropes, felts and blankets can also contain asbestos.

Heating appliances and domestic equipment

Asbestos was used in some warm air heating systems, electric storage heaters (up to 1976), in flameless catalytic gas heaters (up to 1988) and some early 'coal effect' gas fires. A list of manufacturers and models of domestic heaters and boilers known to contain asbestos components are listed on the asbestos information centre website at www.aic.org.uk. Asbestos has also been used in domestic equipment, such as oven gloves, ironing boards, seals on cooker doors and fire blankets.

Vehicles

Some vehicle brake shoes or pads contain asbestos. When carrying out work on the braking system try to avoid breathing the dust or if possible wear a suitable mask. Do not under any circumstances use an air hose to clear the dust.

Remember, asbestos is always there for a purpose. It is used either to provide heat-resistance (as behind gas fires) or provide rigidity (as in asbestos cement garage roofs), and if removed it should always be replaced by a suitable non-asbestos product.

Identification

Identification is not easy as you cannot tell if a particular material contains asbestos by looking at it with the naked eye. The colour of the material does not indicate the type of asbestos, which may be present. The ONLY way to be certain if a product does contain asbestos is for a laboratory to analyse it. A list of laboratories able to provide this service can be found on the ATaC website – www.atac.org.uk

The extent of the asbestos 'problem' does depend on the type of material in place. All asbestos fibre is dangerous, but products such as AIB, lagging, and sprayed coatings are many times more hazardous than other products as the fibres are extremely easy to release.

6 IF I FIND ASBESTOS WHAT SHOULD I DO?

If asbestos is found in the home, look for signs of damage or dust being released by the material. If any asbestos found is in good condition and not worn or damaged, it can be left in place. Added protection can be given by painting with emulsion paint, but remember to use an alkali resistant primer or coating for asbestos cement products. Household should avoid any work on these materials that would raise dust: for example, sanding or drilling should always be avoided.

If the asbestos is damaged or giving off dust it should be carefully removed. Large amounts of asbestos (or any work on sprayed asbestos, lagging or insulation board) should only be removed by a specialist contractor. We do not encourage DIY removal, but if a householder is tempted to disturb / remove small amounts, they should always refer to the available guidance, to ensure that it is done cleanly and disposed of correctly.

Guidance on small scale unlicensed asbestos removal work can be found at www.hse.gov.uk/pubns/guidance/a0.pdf

7 ASBESTOS WASTE

NOTE: If asbestos is not handled and disposed of correctly, there is a serious risk of exposing occupants and others to asbestos fibre. Waste asbestos should never be put in a dustbin or refuse chute.

'Hazardous' or 'Special' Waste needs safe disposal. This includes:

- asbestos;
- materials containing asbestos; and
- anything contaminated with asbestos unless fully decontaminated.

Any asbestos products must be double-bagged and labelled as asbestos waste. Many local councils have provision for the disposal of small quantities of domestic asbestos waste. You should contact your local council waste division to enquire about the facilities available.

The enforcing authority responsible for asbestos waste is the Environment Agency. They can be contacted on their help line number 03708 502 858 or at www.environment-agency.gov.uk

8 USEFUL INFORMATION

Asbestos Testing and Consultancy (ATaC) Association - www.atac.org.uk

Asbestos Removal Contractors Association (ARCA) - www.arca.org.uk

Health & Safety Executive (HSE) - www.hse.gov.uk/asbestos/index.htm

Environment Agency (EA) - www.environment-agency.gov.uk

Government advice for asbestos in the home - www.hse.gov.uk/asbestos/home.htm

Health & Safety Executive (HSE) asbestos FAQs - www.hse.gov.uk/asbestos/faq.htm