



Asbestos

Asbestos is a mineral fiber that was commonly used in a variety of building construction materials for insulation and as a fire retardant.

Where Is It Found?

Most products made today do not contain asbestos. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) have banned several asbestos products, and manufacturers have voluntarily agreed to limit the use of others. Any products made that still contain asbestos are required to be clearly labeled. However, many types of building products and insulation materials made before the 1970s contain asbestos. These products include pipe and furnace insulation materials; asbestos and cement shingles, siding, and roofing; millboard; resilient floor tiles, the backing on vinyl sheet flooring, and floor tile adhesives; soundproofing or decorative material; patching and joint compound; fireproof gloves and stove-top pads; and automobile brake pads and linings, clutch facings, and gaskets.

What Are the Health Effects?

The most dangerous asbestos fibers are too small to be visible. They can become airborne when asbestos-containing materials are disturbed or during improper removal. Once they are inhaled, the fibers can remain and accumulate in the lungs. Breathing high levels of asbestos fibers can lead to an increased risk of lung cancer, mesothelioma (a cancer of the chest and abdominal linings), and asbestosis (irreversible lung scarring that can be fatal). The risk of lung cancer and mesothelioma increases with the number of fibers inhaled. The risk of lung cancer is also greater to people who smoke. Symptoms of these diseases do not show up until many years after exposure begins. Most people with asbestos-related diseases were exposed to elevated concentrations on the job.

What Can Be Done?

Usually it is best to leave asbestos material that is in good condition alone. Generally, material in good condition will not release asbestos fibers. Try to prevent the material from being damaged, disturbed, or touched.

Periodically inspect the material for damage or deterioration. Properly dispose of damaged or worn asbestos gloves, stove-top pads, or ironing board covers. Check with appropriate officials on how to properly handle and dispose of those materials.

The only way to tell if an object contains asbestos by looking at it is if the material is labeled. Otherwise, you should have it sampled and analyzed by a qualified professional. Until you receive the results, treat the material as if it contains asbestos. Samples should be extracted only by qualified professionals. If improperly done, extracting samples can be more hazardous than leaving the material undisturbed.

If the asbestos material is more than slightly damaged, or if you are going to make changes in your home that might disturb the asbestos, repair or removal by a professional is needed. Repair usually means either covering or sealing the asbestos material. Covering involves placing a protective wrap over or around the material that contains the asbestos to prevent the release of fibers. Sealing involves treating the material with a sealant that either binds the asbestos fibers together or coats the material so fibers are not released. Repair is usually cheaper than removal, but may make it more difficult to remove later if the need arises.

Can I Do the Work Myself?

The EPA recommends that when dealing with materials containing asbestos, whether it is to test, repair, or remove, you hire an asbestos professional to do the work for you. Improper handling of asbestos material can create more of a hazard than if it is left undisturbed. If you need to take corrective measures, you should use a different contractor than the one who tested for asbestos in order to avoid a conflict of interest.

Before you decide on an asbestos professional, ask potential contractors to document their completion of a federal or state-approved training program. Also, ask for references from previous clients to learn if they were satisfied. To guard against costly, hazardous, unnecessary removals, know what services are available and what procedures and precautions are needed to do the job properly.

If you need repairs or removal done, make sure the work area is clearly marked as hazardous. Keep household members and pets away from the area until the work is completed. Be sure that your contractor avoids spreading or tracking asbestos dust into other areas of the home. The work area should be properly sealed off from the rest of the house using plastic sheeting and duct tape. Also, the air conditioning and heating system should be turned off. Before asbestos removal, insist that the contractor apply a wetting agent to the asbestos material with a fine-mist hand sprayer. Wet fibers do not float as easily as dry fibers and are easier to clean up. The contractor should use wet mops, rags or sponges to clean the area. HEPA (high efficiency particulate air) vacuum cleaners can also be used. All asbestos materials and disposable equipment and clothing should be placed in marked and sealed leak-proof bags and disposed of properly.