

Asbestos in Older Homes

No one likes to think that they're living with possible health hazards, but if your home was built before 1980, there's a good chance that you are. Many older homes contain asbestos in the materials that were used in its construction. There may be asbestos in ceiling tiles, roof shingles, roofing felt, siding, old floor tiles and vinyl floors, insulation, pipe cement and joint compound used to smooth seams in the sheetrock walls.



Why You Should Know About Asbestos

In most cases, there is no immediate hazard from asbestos, but it is important to learn where it is and how to live with it.

Asbestos becomes hazardous when tiny fibers of the material become airborne. That can happen when materials that contain asbestos in your home become damaged. Damaged materials may release asbestos dust, which is light enough to hang in the air for a long time and small enough that it is easily inhaled. The unique barbed shape of the tiny fibers hooks into soft tissues in your lungs and other organs, where the asbestos can remain for decades.



There are no immediate symptoms if you've been exposed to asbestos. Most asbestos-related illnesses have a very long latency period before they become obvious. The illnesses include:

- asbestosis: progressive scarring of the lungs that is eventually fatal
- lung cancer
- mesothelioma: a rare cancer that damages the tissues that line the lungs, abdominal cavity or heart
- other cancers including cancer of the esophagus, larynx, colorectal tract and stomach

When you know where you might find asbestos in your home, you can take precautions to lessen the risk of releasing asbestos into the air. Those precautions include limiting contact and disturbance to the materials, taking steps to repair the materials and, in rare cases, removing asbestos containing materials from your home. For more information on [asbestos cancer](#) and [mesothelioma treatment](#) please see the resources at Asbestos.com.

When Asbestos Can Become a Hazard

Asbestos becomes a hazard when the materials that contain it are disturbed or damaged enough that they release asbestos fibers. Asbestos insulation around pipes or boilers may deteriorate, for instance, and release dust. Ceilings with asbestos coatings might release asbestos if they are drilled, sanded or patched. Home renovation and repair projects may cause hazardous asbestos releases if they disturb asbestos-containing materials. Before you consider projects like rewiring your home, installing a new heating system or tearing up old flooring tiles, you should know whether you'll be disturbing materials that contain asbestos.

Finding Out If There's Asbestos In Your Home

There is no easy way to visually identify materials that contain asbestos unless they happen to be labeled as such. The only reliable way to identify which materials in your home may contain asbestos is to have a professional asbestos surveyor sample and test the materials. You can have a surveyor test just materials that you suspect may contain asbestos, or survey your entire home to identify materials that contain asbestos.

It is possible to obtain your own samples of materials that you suspect contain asbestos, but it is not recommended because there is always the risk of releasing asbestos fibers into the air. If you do choose to obtain your own samples, be sure that you understand how to reduce the risk of exposing yourself and others in your household to asbestos fibers. For example, you may need to wear protective clothing such as gloves or a respirator.



If You Find Asbestos in Your House

If a professional inspection turns up asbestos in your home, you'll have a several options for dealing with it and reducing the risk of asbestos exposure. The best choice will depend upon the condition of the material, where it is in your home and whether it is friable or non-friable. Friable asbestos can be easily crushed and crumbled by hand. There's a far higher risk of asbestos release when asbestos is friable. When the asbestos material is non-friable, asbestos release is unlikely unless the material is sanded, cut, sawed, drilled or otherwise damaged.

If the materials are in good condition and is in an area where it is not likely to become damaged, the American Lung Association says that the best thing to do is leave it alone. Check it for signs of deterioration and avoid damaging it, but otherwise no other precautions are necessary.

In other cases, it may be recommended to repair or isolate the materials that contain asbestos. The two methods that are most often used to abate the hazards of asbestos are encapsulation and enclosure. Encapsulating materials involves treating them with a substance of some sort to bind the asbestos. The substance may be a penetrating sealant or a surface sealer. Enclosure involves covering the material that contains asbestos with some sort of barrier to prevent asbestos being released.

The most permanent solution to asbestos in your home is removal. Because removing asbestos carries a high risk of asbestos release, it is usually only recommended in cases where the asbestos is friable, damaged or in an area where it will be disturbed. This might happen if you are doing major renovations or if the material is very damaged. It is also required by law before a home is demolished.

Who Should Remove or Repair Asbestos

Improper handling of asbestos can cause a serious health hazard, not only to yourself and your family, but also to the entire community. Whether you choose to have asbestos repaired or removed, you should choose a qualified professional who is licensed or certified to work with asbestos.

Your state or local EPA or health department can provide you with a list of qualified and certified asbestos removers.

For more information on asbestos exposure and abatement please visit the [Asbestos and Mesothelioma Center](#).