

Asbestos Information Sheet

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Owner: Health, Wellbeing and Safety (HR)

(Source: <http://www.asbestos.vic.gov.au/about-asbestos>)

Asbestos and your health

Asbestos becomes a potential risk to health if fibres are suspended in air and breathed into the lungs. Breathing asbestos fibres into the lungs can cause a range of diseases, including mesothelioma, lung cancer and asbestosis.

We are all exposed to low levels of asbestos in the air we breathe every day. Ambient or background air usually contains between 10 and 200 fibres every 1,000 litres (or cubic metre) of air. Whether a person goes on to develop an asbestos-related disease depends on a range of circumstances or exposure factors; for example, the level and duration of exposure, length of time since first exposure, the fibre type, and concurrent exposure to tobacco smoke and other carcinogens.

A very small number of asbestos-related disease cases occur each year in people who have not worked with asbestos products. The low number of cases makes it difficult to determine the exact cause of the disease or which exposure to asbestos was the contributing factor.

Risk from Asbestos

Asbestos has been used in the manufacturing of various products. These products can be found in either friable or non-friable form. All products are also known as asbestos-containing material (ACM).

Friable asbestos

Friable asbestos products are generally quite loose and, when dry, can be crumbled into fine material or dust with very light pressure. If disturbed, friable asbestos products are dangerous because the asbestos fibres can get into the air very easily, and may be inhaled by people living or working in the area.

Friable asbestos products have been commonly used in commercial and industrial settings since the late 1800's for fireproofing, soundproofing and insulation. Some friable products were also used in houses and may still be found in houses built before 1990. Examples of friable asbestos-containing material may include: pipe lagging, boiler insulation, fire retardant material on steel work and sprayed insulation.

Bonded (non-friable) asbestos

Bonded asbestos products are made from a bonding compound (such as cement or plastic) mixed with a small proportion (usually less than 15%) of asbestos. Bonded asbestos products are solid, rigid and non-friable, and cannot be crumbled, pulverised or reduced to powder by hand pressure. The asbestos fibres are tightly bound in the product and are not normally released into the air. Common names for cement bonded asbestos products are 'fibro', 'asbestos cement' and 'AC sheeting'.

When they're in good condition, bonded asbestos products do not normally release any asbestos fibres into the air. They are considered a very low risk for people who are in contact with them, as long as appropriate safety precautions are used when they are disturbed. However, when bonded asbestos products are damaged exposed to some strong chemicals or badly weathered, areas may become friable. Examples of non-friable asbestos containing material may include: asbestos cement sheet, bitumen-based water proofing and vinyl floor tiles.

Managing Asbestos

Employers are responsible for managing asbestos in their workplace so far as is reasonably practicable. This includes ensuring all asbestos and suspected asbestos is documented in your asbestos register.

If the asbestos is in good condition and left undisturbed, it is usually safer to leave it fixed or installed and review its condition over time provided it is unlikely that asbestos fibres will be released into the air and the risk to health is extremely low. An employer must ensure that the presence and location of identified asbestos is clearly indicated; and if reasonably practicable, the indication is by labelling.