

Asbestos - General Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs)

What Is Asbestos?

Asbestos is a mineral fiber. It can be positively identified only with a special type of microscope. There are several types of asbestos fibers. In the past, asbestos was added to a variety of products to improve strength and to provide heat insulation and fire resistance.

How Can Asbestos Affect My Health?

Studies of people who were exposed to asbestos in factories and shipyards show breathing high levels of asbestos fibers can lead to an increased risk of lung cancer, including:

- mesothelioma, a cancer of the lining of the chest and the abdominal cavity; and
- asbestosis, in which the lungs become scarred with fibrous tissue.

The risk of lung cancer and mesothelioma increases with the number of fibers inhaled. The risk of lung cancer from inhaling asbestos fibers is also greater if you smoke. People who get asbestosis have usually been exposed to high levels of asbestos for a long time. The symptoms of these diseases do not usually appear until about 20 to 30 years after the first exposure to asbestos.

Most people exposed to small amounts of asbestos, as we all are in our daily lives, do not develop these health problems. However, if disturbed, asbestos material may release asbestos fibers, which can be inhaled into the lungs. The fibers can remain there for a long time, increasing the risk of disease. Asbestos material that would crumble easily if handled, or that has been sawed, scraped, or sanded into a powder, is more likely to create a health hazard.

Where Can I Find Asbestos And When Can It Be A Problem?

Most products made today do not contain asbestos. Those few products made which still contain asbestos that could be inhaled are required to be labeled as such. However, until the 1980s, many types of building products and insulation materials used in homes contained asbestos.

Common products that might have contained asbestos in the past, and conditions which may release fibers, include:

1. STEAM PIPES, BOILERS, and FURNACE DUCTS insulated with an asbestos blanket or asbestos paper tape. These materials may release asbestos fibers if damaged, repaired, or removed improperly;
2. RESILIENT FLOOR TILES (vinyl asbestos, asphalt, and rubber), the backing on VINYL SHEET FLOORING, and ADHESIVES used for installing floor tile. Sanding tiles and scraping or sanding the backing of sheet flooring during removal may release asbestos fibers;

3. CEMENT SHEET, MILLBOARD, and PAPER used as insulation around furnaces and woodburning stoves. Repairing or removing appliances and cutting, tearing, sanding, drilling, or sawing insulation may release asbestos fibers;
4. DOOR GASKETS in furnaces, wood stoves, and coal stoves. Worn seals can release asbestos fibers during use;
5. SOUNDPROOFING OR DECORATIVE MATERIAL sprayed on walls and ceilings. Loose, crumbly, or water-damaged material may release asbestos fibers. Sanding, drilling, or scraping the material could also release fibers;
6. PATCHING AND JOINT COMPOUNDS for walls and ceilings, and TEXTURED PAINTS. Sanding, scraping, or drilling these surfaces may release asbestos;
7. ASBESTOS CEMENT ROOFING, SHINGLES, and SIDING. These products are not likely to release asbestos fibers unless sawed, dilled, or cut;
8. ARTIFICIAL ASHES AND EMBERS sold for use in gas-fired fireplaces;
9. Older household products such as FIREPROOF GLOVES, STOVE-TOP PADS, IRONING BOARD COVERS, and certain HAIRDRYERS; and
10. AUTOMOBILE BRAKE PADS AND LININGS, CLUTCH FACINGS, and GASKETS.

Where Are Asbestos Hazards In Buildings?

- Some roofing and siding shingles are made of asbestos cement.
- Houses built between 1930 and 1950 may have asbestos as insulation.
- Asbestos may be present in textured paint and in patching compounds used on wall and ceiling joints. Their use was banned in 1977.
- Artificial ashes and embers sold for use in gas-fired fireplaces may contain asbestos.
- Older products such as stove-top pads may have some asbestos compounds.
- Walls and floors around woodburning stoves may be protected with asbestos paper, millboard, or cement sheets.
- Asbestos is found in some vinyl floor tiles and the backing on vinyl sheet flooring and adhesives.
- Hot water and steam pipes in older houses may be coated with an asbestos material or covered with an asbestos blanket or tape.
- Oil and coal furnaces and door gaskets may have asbestos insulation.

What Should Be Done About Asbestos?

Don't panic! Usually the best thing is to not disturb and LEAVE asbestos material that is in good condition ALONE.

Generally, material in good condition will not release asbestos fibers. THERE IS NO DANGER unless fibers are released and inhaled into the lungs.

Check material regularly if you suspect it may contain asbestos. Don't touch it, but look for signs of wear or damage such as tears, abrasions, or water damage. Damaged material may release asbestos fibers. This is particularly true if you often disturb it by hitting, rubbing, or handling it, or if it is exposed to extreme vibration or air flow.

Sometimes, the best way to deal with slightly damaged material is to limit access to the area and not touch or disturb it. Discard damaged or worn asbestos gloves, stove-top pads, or ironing board covers. Contact EH&S at 878-4038 for proper handling and disposal procedures.

If asbestos material is more than slightly damaged, repair or removal by a professional may be needed.

To view Frequently Asked Questions on campus asbestos hazard abatement projects, [click here \(86 Kb\)](#).