NATIONAL HOME IMPROVEMENT COUNCIL

Construction Leadership Council

DOORSTEP DIGEST

Understanding Asbestos in the Home

Asbestos can be dangerous if disturbed. Know where it's found and how to deal with it safely during home improvement work.

Understanding Asbestos in the Home

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This digest explains what asbestos is, the health risks it can pose, where it may be found in the home, the legal responsibilities you need to be aware of, and the steps you can take to stay safe.

What is Asbestos?

Asbestos is a naturally occurring mineral that was once widely used in building materials due to its strength, heat resistance, and insulating properties. It was commonly used in homes built before 2000, particularly between the 1950s and 1980s. However, we now know asbestos fibres can cause serious health risks if disturbed and inhaled. Recognising and managing asbestos safely is vital for anyone working in home improvement.

Did you know?

- There are three main types of fibres: chrysotile (white), amosite (brown), and crocidolite (blue).
- The mineral itself is very rarely found in its raw form but is often present within building products commonly referred to as Asbestos-Containing Materials (ACMS).

Examples of asbestos in the home

Asbestos can be found in various materials commonly used in and around homes. From 1930 to around 1980, especially during the 1960s, asbestos-containing building materials were widely utilised. Therefore, houses and flats constructed or renovated during this period may contain asbestos. The use of asbestos in most products was banned in 1993, with a complete ban on its use in all products coming into effect in 1999.

Asbestos Insulating Board has been utilised for fire protection, as well as heat and sound insulation. It was particularly common in system-built housing during the 1960s and 1970s and can be found in various materials, including ducts, infill panels, ceiling tiles, wall linings, bath panels, and partitions. Asbestos Insulating Board (AIB) is also used in some warm air heating systems and for lining cupboards that house central heating units. Additionally, certain storage heaters may contain asbestos materials. Today, several modern alternatives to asbestos boarding are available, and it is unlikely to find asbestos in buildings constructed after 1982.

Asbestos lagging was commonly used for thermal insulation of pipes and boilers, particularly in public buildings and system-built flats from the 1960s to the early 1970s. This material was typically found in areas such as boiler houses and heating plants. It is very rare to find asbestos lagging in homes, especially in those built after the mid-1970s. The use of asbestos for thermal insulation was officially banned in 1986.

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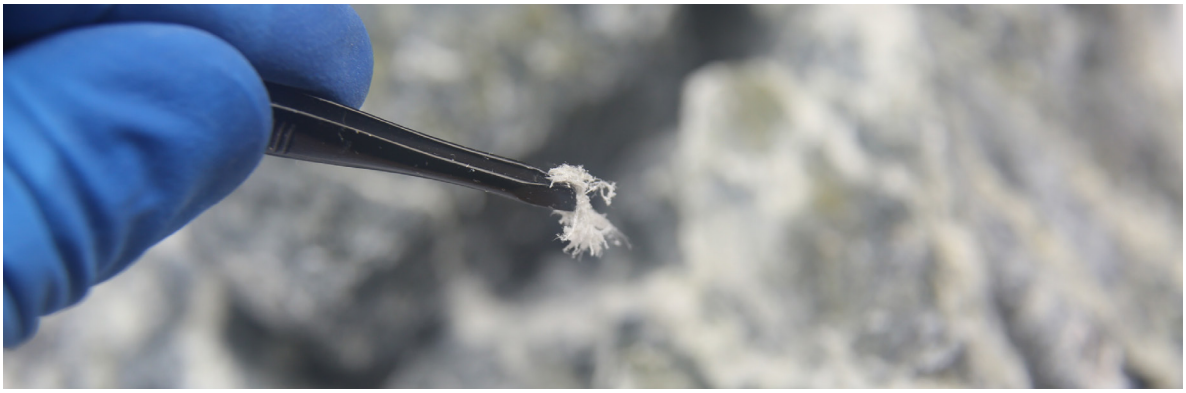
Sprayed asbestos coatings were used for fire protection on structural steel and are commonly found in system-built flats constructed during the 1960s. These coatings were primarily applied around the core areas of buildings, such as service ducts and lift shafts. The use of sprayed asbestos stopped in 1974, and its spraying has been prohibited since 1986. Since then, sprayed asbestos has been removed from many buildings or sealed off to prevent the release of fibres.

Asbestos-cement is the most commonly used asbestos material, found in a variety of building applications. It is used for profiled sheets in roofing and wall cladding, flat sheets and partition boards for wall and ceiling linings, bath panels, soffit boards, fire surrounds, flue pipes, cold water tanks, and roofing tiles and slates. Additionally, it has often been utilised for roofing and cladding in garages and sheds, as well as in guttering and drainpipes. Asbestos-cement products are unlikely to release high levels of fibres due to their manufacturing process, unless they are subjected to extreme abrasion.

KEY ADVICE

The exact level of exposure that can cause health issues due to asbestos fibres is not known, but the risk increases with the amount of asbestos dust a person is exposed to.



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When is asbestos dangerous to you?

Asbestos products only pose a danger when they are damaged or disturbed, as this can release dust into the air. Asbestos fibres are extremely small and can be easily disturbed, often without being visible to the naked eye. It's important to note that domestic vacuum cleaners are not suitable for cleaning up asbestos dust, as their filters are insufficient to capture harmful asbestos fibres.

The exact level of exposure that can cause health issues due to asbestos fibres is not known, but the risk increases with the amount of asbestos dust a person is exposed to. Therefore, it is crucial to minimise the release of asbestos dust.

Inhaling very high levels of these fibres can lead to lung diseases, including cancer. Those who have worked with asbestos for many years or have laundered the clothes of workers exposed to asbestos are at the highest risk of being affected.

Older heating appliances and domestic equipment

Asbestos can be found in various domestic appliances and fittings, particularly those manufactured before 1980. This includes items such as water heaters, range hoods, clothes dryers, dishwashers, refrigerators, freezers, portable dishwashers, toasters, slow cookers, and portable heaters. It was also used in warm air heating systems and electric storage heaters (up until 1976), as well as in flameless catalytic gas heaters (up until 1988) and some early 'coal effect' gas fires.

Additionally, asbestos has been used in household items such as oven gloves, ironing boards, seals on cooker doors, and fire blankets.

How do you identify asbestos?

The colour of the material does not indicate the type of asbestos that may be present. It is challenging to visually identify asbestos, as modern asbestos-free materials often resemble those that contain asbestos. Generally, older products are more likely to contain asbestos.

The only way to confirm whether a product contains asbestos is to have it analysed by a laboratory. A list of laboratories offering this service can be found on the Asbestos Testing and **Consultancy Association (ATaC) website**.

The extent of the asbestos issue depends on the type of material present. While all asbestos fibres are hazardous, certain products—such as asbestos insulating boards, lagging, and sprayed coatings—pose significantly greater risks because their fibres can be easily released into the air.

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It's essential to remember that asbestos is used for specific purposes, such as providing heat resistance (for example, behind gas fires) or adding rigidity (as seen in asbestos-cement garage roofs). If asbestos is removed, it should always be replaced with a suitable non-asbestos product.

Does all asbestos need to be removed?

No, this can often lead to more problems. If the material is in undamaged condition or is enclosed or encapsulated, it is usually safer to leave it alone. Those responsible for business premises are required to identify their location (or mark it with a label) so that appropriate precautions can be taken if any work might disturb it.

If I find asbestos, what should I do about it?

Householders do not have any legal duty other than to dispose of any asbestos safely. The UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) does not recommend the DIY removal of asbestos without professional advice. The government authority responsible for hazardous waste, including asbestos, is the **Environment Agency**.

Email: **enquiries@environment-agency.gov.uk**

Telephone: **03708 506 506** Monday to Friday, 8am to 6pm.

You can also contact your **local council** for more information about asbestos and its disposal.

DIY removal is not encouraged, but if a householder is tempted to disturb or remove small amounts, they should always refer to the available guidance to ensure that it is done cleanly and disposed of correctly.

For contractors working in your home, guidance on small-scale, unlicensed asbestos removal work can be found in the government's Health and Safety Executive guidance, **Introduction to Asbestos Essentials.**

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Government regulations regarding asbestos

Due to the risks associated with asbestos exposure, work involving asbestos is subject to very strict regulatory control. Workplace regulations, including the **Control of Asbestos Regulations 2012, Approved Code of Practice, and guidance**, apply to tradespeople working on asbestos in your home. They are legally required to have sufficient training, equipment, and work methods to carry out the work in a way that prevents 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.

Asbestos waste disposal

If asbestos is not handled and disposed of correctly, there is a serious risk of exposing yourself and others to asbestos fibres. Asbestos waste should never be placed in a dustbin or refuse chute. This is classed as "Hazardous" or "Special" waste that needs safe disposal. Any asbestos products must be double-bagged and labelled as asbestos waste. You must not mix asbestos waste with other types of waste.

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Further Information and Contacts

Asbestos Testing and Consultancy (ATaC) Association

Asbestos Removal Contractors Association (ARCA)

Environment Agency (EA)

Government advice for asbestos in the home

Health & Safety Executive (HSE) asbestos FAQS

NHS – Asbestos exposure advice

What to do if you think you have been in contact with asbestos

Contact your doctor, the NHS online or call 111 and remove yourself from the source of exposure.

KEY ADVICE

Asbestos products only pose a danger when they are damaged or disturbed, as this can release dust into the air.

The NHIC would like to thank the RMI WG2 Consumer Voice members for their contributions to this guide.

Please note that this guidance document, produced by the NHIC, was accurate when it was created. However, information and regulations may have changed since the publication of this document. Therefore, seeking the most up-to-date information and expert advice is always advisable before making any decisions related to improving your home.

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