

Asbestos safety information

Asbestos is a naturally occurring, fibrous silicate mineral. Once mined, rock containing the asbestos mineral is crushed and processed to produce pure fibres. The three types of asbestos which have been used in the UK are: crocidolite (blue asbestos), amosite (brown asbestos) and chrysotile (white asbestos). You cannot identify asbestos by the colour as it is often incorporated with other materials. To be certain that a material contains asbestos, it should be analysed by a laboratory.

Why was asbestos used?

Asbestos is resistant to heat and chemicals. It is also flexible and very strong. This led to its use in a wide range of building materials and household products. White asbestos was most commonly used in domestic appliances and buildings. Brown asbestos was used in thermal insulation up to the late 1960s and in various sprayed applications and insulating boards until the middle and late 1970s respectively. Blue asbestos, which has not been imported into this country since about 1972, was used for insulation lagging and sprayed coating. The marketing, supply and new use of blue and brown asbestos was prohibited in 1985 and white asbestos in 1999.

When is asbestos a problem?

When asbestos-containing materials are damaged or deteriorate with age they can release fibres into the air. The shape and size of asbestos fibres enables them to penetrate deep into the lungs, where they can stay for a long time. Asbestos fibres can split lengthways and penetrate lung tissue. Blue and brown asbestos are thought to be the most dangerous forms.

What are the health risks?

There are asbestos materials in an estimated 5.5 million buildings in the UK. Because asbestos has been so widely used, there is a low level of asbestos fibres in the air everywhere. While asbestos is potentially a very hazardous material, the risk to the public from asbestos in the home and public buildings is low.

A greater risk to health arises when asbestos is damaged or if the material is drilled, sawn, scrubbed or sanded. Asbestos can be released in hot air heating systems and during the 'vibration' of structural wall and ceiling insulation panels. When disturbed, tiny fibres are released into the air. DIY work can result in brief but high levels of exposure. If you suspect that a material might contain asbestos do not carry out work on it - seek expert advice.

The largest group at risk from asbestos exposure are building workers (plumbers, electricians, gas fitters). As part of their work they might unwittingly drill into or otherwise disturb asbestos-containing materials on a regular basis. There are currently 3000 asbestos related deaths a year – the majority of these casualties were exposed to asbestos before 1970. To stop these deaths continuing, the Health and Safety Executive today advises workers on building refurbishments to always make enquiries about the potential presence of asbestos before starting a job.

Where is Asbestos?

Around buildings and homes asbestos may be found in the following:

- roof and wall claddings textured paints
- pipe lagging insulation of warm air heating systems
- flat roof decking tiles central heating system insulation
- flue-pipes/gutters/rainwater storage heaters
- downpipes/airbricks catalytic heaters
- window boxes (LPG) portable heaters
- roof slates ironing boards
- roof linings cold water cisterns
- roofing felts thermoplastics and vinyl floor tiles
- internal partitions, wall boards, airing
- cupboard linings and shelving, duct
- and pipe covers
- filler ropes surrounding oven doors and
- solid fuel fires

Asbestos is no longer used in goods such as toasters, hair driers, gas and solid fuel appliances that conform to a British Standard.

What do I do if I suspect I have asbestos in my home or workplace?

You must assume that any asbestos is potentially lethal. Do not drill, saw, scrub it with wire brushes, or disturb it in any way. Do not take risks - treat asbestos with respect.

If you are in any doubt as to whether any material already contains asbestos, or if you suspect your home contains damaged asbestos material, do not try to deal with it yourself - seek expert advice.

First, ask your employer or the owner of your building or your landlord. They have a duty to safely manage asbestos in their business operations or their buildings.

If you are not satisfied with what they tell you, contact the Pollution Monitoring Team. They can examine suspect material and can advise on subsequent action (either to get it stripped out by an experienced and licensed contractor or sealed with a plastic-type coating). If necessary, they will put you in touch with other relevant authorities such as the Health and Safety Executive (HSE).

How do I dispose of asbestos?

Small items of asbestos material around the home can be disposed of if you are careful. Carefully dispose of such items as ironing board rests and simmering pads when they become worn. Damp them down and put them in a tightly sealed plastic bag labelled "asbestos". Asbestos should not be placed in the dustbin - refuse vehicles grind waste up and asbestos fibres could be released.

The Hazardous Waste Collection and Disposal Service is free of charge to householders and schools. It covers the collection and disposal of small quantities of asbestos. Excess quantities (over 5 small or 3 large sheets of asbestos or 50 litres/kg of chemicals) will incur a charge. The service is available for a charge to commercial customers. Contact them on 020 7332 3433.

Do not use a vacuum cleaner to clean up debris as the very small fibres pass straight through the bag and are then distributed throughout the house. Damp down and remove it with a cloth which should then be put, still damp, into a plastic bag and carefully labelled and sealed.

The general rule for larger items containing asbestos is - if it is undamaged, leave it alone.

Indoors, asbestos cement should be sealed by painting with an alkali-resistant paint such as PVA emulsion, or primed with alkali-resistant primer and then covered with normal undercoat and gloss paint. Asbestos cement or board should not be sanded before painting.

Asbestos insulation board, which is softer than asbestos cement, should be replaced if it is damaged or likely to be damaged during alterations. Do not drill, sand, or break it up. If it is to be removed, get advice from the Pollution Monitoring Team. All removal work should be carried out with strict attention to safety. Any significant removal work must be undertaken by an HSE licensed asbestos removal contractor. The aim is to keep the material whole if possible, to prevent any spread of dust and keep people away from removal areas.

If you have textured coating containing asbestos, it is best to leave it alone and cover it with a coat of emulsion. Stripping it off is difficult and potentially dangerous and should only be done by licensed contractors. However, small quantities can be soaked so that they become a soggy mass before being gently scraped off.

Contractors should be licensed under the Asbestos Licensing Regulations. The work has to be carefully carried out by operators who will be equipped with masks and protective clothing. They work under airtight conditions to prevent the release of any asbestos fibres into the home or outside. Air samples will be taken to ensure that the work has been done properly. These samples should be taken by an independent, approved agency.

Some Common Problems & What to do

Storage Heaters - some electric storage heaters, generally those manufactured before 1975, contain asbestos. Your electricity supplier should have an up-to-date list of heaters which have been identified as containing asbestos. Do not dismantle the storage heater to check whether or not this is the case! Generally, the heaters are perfectly safe as long as they are not tampered with. If you wish to have the heater(s) removed, this must be done by licensed contractors. Seek advice from the Pollution Monitoring Team about safe disposal.

Catalytic Heaters - some catalytic heaters, burning butane and propane without a visible flame, may contain an asbestos panel if manufactured before 1983. If you suspect that you have one of these heaters, contact your local authority with details of the appliance - which will then be checked to see whether it is one containing asbestos. If you are in doubt, do not use the heater in the meantime.

Brake Linings - car brake and clutch linings and disc brake pads can contain asbestos. Replace brake linings with care if you are doing it yourself. Use a damp cloth to wipe dust out of the drum. Do not blow it out. Put the cloth into a sealed and labelled plastic bag for disposal. Wear a mask approved for work with asbestos while doing the job. It is now illegal in the UK to install asbestos brake linings in vehicles.

Cookers - some older cookers may have asbestos filler ropes around the inside of the oven door. If it appears to be in bad condition, contact the manufacturer of the oven for advice, or speak to the Pollution Monitoring Team.

Gutters and Corrugated Roofs - keep gutters and drains serving asbestos roofs clear of debris. Silted up gutter traps can contain a high percentage of asbestos fibres. If you suspect it may be asbestos, do not sweep with wire brushes to get rid of moss etc. If made of asbestos, you will be sweeping off fibres as well as moss. If removing gutters or roofs, do not break them up; seek advice from the Pollution Monitoring Team about safe disposal.

What are the laws on asbestos?

The *Asbestos (Prohibitions) Regulations 1985 as amended* prohibited the importation into the UK of all types of asbestos. The only exception is where the material is required for assessment or evaluation. The Regulations also prohibited the supply or use of products containing asbestos. The only exceptions were limited uses of white asbestos where there were no substitute materials. These regulations enforce EU restrictions.

The *Control of Asbestos in Air Regulations 1990* implemented EU controls on asbestos. They limited emissions from all processes involving the use of asbestos and emissions from the working of products containing asbestos - this includes the demolition of buildings.

The *Control of Asbestos Regulations 2012* came into force on 6 April 2012, updating previous asbestos regulations to take account of the European Commission's view that the UK had not fully implemented the EU Directive on exposure to asbestos. In practice the changes are fairly limited. They mean that some types of non-licensed work with asbestos now have additional requirements, i.e. notification of work, medical surveillance and record keeping.

The information in this leaflet is substantially based on the NSCA's leaflet "Asbestos" and has been used with the NSCA's permission. Contact the NSCA at www.nasca.org.uk.

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