



## FACT SHEET

# ASBESTOS

Asbestos is a naturally occurring mineral which was used extensively in Australia in the manufacture of building materials from the mid-1940s to the 1980s until a national ban in 2003.

Asbestos fibres are strong, heat resistant and have insulating properties. Clumps of mined asbestos can be broken down into loose fibres or fibre bundles and can be mixed with other materials, such as cement, to produce a variety of building and other products.

Asbestos fibres can be found in the air from the breakdown of natural asbestos deposits and manufactured asbestos products. Once airborne, small fibres may remain suspended in the air for some time and can be carried long distances by wind before settling down.

### TYPES OF ASBESTOS

Three types of asbestos were mined in Australia: white (chrysotile), blue (crocidolite) and brown (amosite) asbestos. The majority of asbestos (90%) used throughout the world, including Australia, was white asbestos.

Australia banned the use or import of blue and brown asbestos or asbestos products in the mid-1980s, and banned all white asbestos products in December 2003.

Asbestos-containing building products are classified as either 'friable' (soft, crumbly) or 'bonded' (solid, rigid, non-friable).

Some places you might find asbestos are:

- Internal and external wall cladding
- Eaves
- Ceilings
- Vinyl floor tiles
- Debris in soil
- Toilet partitioning
- Roofing
- Shingles and siding
- Water or flue pipes
- Landfill

## DANGERS RELATED TO ASBESTOS

Asbestos poses a risk to health when asbestos fibres are inhaled. Undisturbed asbestos-containing materials in good condition do not pose a health risk because the asbestos fibres are bound together.

When asbestos fibres are inhaled, they can get lodged in the lungs and may cause asbestos-related diseases such as pleural plaques, asbestosis and, in more serious cases, lung cancer and mesothelioma.

For more information regarding asbestos and your health, visit [www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au](http://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au).

## EXPOSURE TO ASBESTOS

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 asbestos fibres in every 1000 litres (or cubic metre). However, most people do not become ill from this exposure because the levels of asbestos present in the environment are very low<sup>1</sup>.

You may be exposed to higher levels of asbestos fibres as a result of an asbestos-related incident such as:

- Accidental damage to asbestos-containing material
- Physical damage from a storm
- General wear and tear/deterioration
- Maintenance works/demolition/refurbishment

People may be exposed to higher levels of asbestos risk at some time in their lives, for example in their workplace, community or home. However, for most people, this kind of exposure is also unlikely to result in any ill effects.

If you are concerned about the health risks associated with exposure, seek medical advice from your GP.

## WHAT IS AN ASBESTOS-RELATED INCIDENT?

Any direct action that exposes asbestos-containing material and has the potential to release fibres such as:

- damaging
- wear or erosion
- breaking
- abrasive cleaning
- sanding and scraping
- sampling, cutting and drilling
- penetrating and removing asbestos-containing material in an unplanned manner.

## WHAT HAPPENS WHEN AN ASBESTOS-RELATED INCIDENT IS REPORTED AT A SCHOOL?

All asbestos-related incidents are required to be reported to the school principal or asbestos coordinator. The incident must then be managed in accordance with the School Asbestos Management Plan.

The school and/or the Victorian School Building Authority will:

- ensure the area is secure and access is restricted
- call the 24-hour Asbestos Hotline

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<sup>1</sup> Environmental Health Standing Committee (enHealth), Asbestos: A guide for householders and the general public, Australian Health Protection Principal Committee, Canberra, 2013

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- complete the incident management register
  - arrange any works that need to take place such as repair, removal, cleaning, exclusion
  - investigate the incident if required
  - provide written notification to school community of the asbestos incident.

Our occupational hygienists will conduct air-quality monitoring during all applicable asbestos removal works, and will provide a clearance certificate when the areas are safe to be accessed and re-occupied.

### MORE INFORMATION

You can find more information about asbestos on the following websites:

[www.asbestos.vic.gov.au](http://www.asbestos.vic.gov.au)

<https://www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/>

[www.epa.vic.gov.au](http://www.epa.vic.gov.au)

<https://www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/>