

# Asbestos and health risks

## Fact sheet

Asbestos is a naturally occurring mineral. It is in our soil and air in small amounts. We are exposed to low levels of asbestos every day and do not get sick.

Living or working with asbestos, or just being around it, is a low risk to your health as long as the asbestos is in good condition and not damaged.

If asbestos is damaged and you breathe in the fibres it may be a risk to your health. Breathing in a small amount of fibres is unlikely to make you sick. Most people who develop asbestos-related diseases have worked in jobs where they frequently breathed in large amounts of asbestos fibres for a long time.

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## What is asbestos?

Asbestos is a natural mineral. It was used in many building products before it was banned in Australia.

It was common in:

- cement sheeting (fibro)
- drainage and flue pipes (including exhaust and chimney ducting)
- roofing, guttering and flexible building boards (e.g. Villaboard, Hardiflex, etc.). Similar cement sheeting products are used today, but do not contain asbestos. Many are labelled 'asbestos free'
- automotive products such as brakes, clutches and gaskets
- home roof insulation in the 1960s and 1970s in some parts of NSW.

Many homes and buildings in NSW built or renovated before 1990 have asbestos.

Asbestos is found in the soil naturally in some places in Australia. It can also be found in places where asbestos was mined or manufactured if these have not been cleaned up. Sometimes people may have buried or dumped asbestos products and these can end up in the soil.

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## How can asbestos affect my health?

Your health can be affected if you breathe in asbestos fibres in the air. This is the main way that asbestos enters the body.

Living or working with asbestos, or just being around it, is a low risk to your health as long as the asbestos is in good condition and not damaged.

Asbestos can be damaged by the weather. It can also be damaged by being cut, drilled or water blasted. Damaging the asbestos can release small fibres into the air.

Breathing in these asbestos fibres can damage your lung tissue. Over time this may cause lung disease, including asbestosis, lung cancer and mesothelioma. Your risk of lung cancer from breathing in asbestos fibres is also greater if you smoke.

However, you generally need to be around high levels of asbestos for a long time to get these health problems. It takes about 20 to 30 years for symptoms of these diseases to show after you were first around asbestos.

Many people whose health has been affected by asbestos include those who:

- worked in the asbestos mining or milling industry
- worked in industries involved in making or installing asbestos products
- are immediate family members of these workers.

The workers and family members were around lots of asbestos fibres in the air and breathed them in. This happened because:

- of the work processes (e.g. cutting building materials)
- the asbestos fibres were all over their clothes.

Most people who are around small amounts of asbestos do not develop asbestos-related health problems.

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## Do all forms of asbestos have the same health risk?

No. Different forms of asbestos have different risk levels.

There are two forms of asbestos:

- **non-friable (bonded):** asbestos that is mixed with cement or other bonding materials. Asbestos in this form, and in good condition, is likely to be a low risk to your health.
- **friable:** asbestos that can be crumbled, pulverised or turned into a powder in your hand. These asbestos fibres can be a health risk if they go into the air and you breathe them in. The more fibres you breathe in, the higher the risk.

Non-friable (bonded) asbestos can become friable asbestos. This happens if the asbestos is damaged. Asbestos can be damaged by the weather or by being cut, drilled, water blasted or similar.

Your house or workplace may be made from non-friable (bonded) asbestos. It could include:

- fibro sheets
- roofing
- shingles and siding (villaboard and similar)
- exterior and interior wall cladding
- eaves
- fencing
- thermal boards around fireplaces
- water or flue pipes.

This does not mean your health is at risk. If the non-friable (bonded) asbestos is not damaged and in good condition you do not generally need to remove the products.

Some asbestos fibres are not bound to a solid product like cement. Examples include pipe insulation or loose fibre asbestos (sprayed) roof insulation. These are friable asbestos. This means lots of loose asbestos fibres can go into the air if the insulation material is disturbed by being touched or moved.

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## How do I protect myself from asbestos?

You must always use a licensed asbestos professional to remove friable asbestos and when there is more than 10sqm of non-friable (bonded) asbestos. However due to the risks associated with removing asbestos, SafeWork NSW recommends you use a licensed asbestos professional to remove any amount of non-friable asbestos.

Learn more about the safe [removal of asbestos](#) or [find a licensed professional at SafeWork NSW](#).

If you find damaged products or soil that you think might contain asbestos, while awaiting professional advice:

- do not touch or move the products or soil
- spray the soil or products with water to stop asbestos fibres going into the air. Be careful around electrical fittings
- cover the soil or products with plastic sheeting or a tarpaulin (tarp) if you can. This will help stop the weather affecting it
- stop children and pets touching or playing with the soil or products
- cover or remove furniture and children's toys
- do not dry sweep or vacuum. Use wet clean up procedures instead. This includes mopping or wet sweeping
- do not enter roof spaces where loose fibre asbestos (sprayed) insulation may have been used. Stop access to the roof space through manholes and vents.

If you must enter areas of your home that have friable asbestos, follow the [SafeWork NSW guidance on fit testing and personal protective equipment \(PPE\)](#) or contact a [licensed asbestos professional](#) for advice.

Read more about asbestos removal on [Asbestos in NSW](#).

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## Further information

Call your local [public health unit](#) on 1300 066 055 if you need more information about the health risks of asbestos.

If you are concerned about asbestos exposure as part of your occupation, contact SafeWork NSW on 13 10 50.

General information on asbestos can be found on [SafeWork NSW](#).