

## 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 strengthen them and to provide heat insulation and fire resistance.

## HOW CAN ASBESTOS AFFECT MY HEALTH?

From studies of people who were exposed to asbestos in factories and shipyards, we know that breathing high levels of asbestos fibers can lead to an increased risk of: lung cancer 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 1970s, 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:

- ▶ **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.
- ▶ **RESILIENT FLOOR TILES** (vinyl asbestos, asphalt, and rubber), the backing on **VINYL SHEET FLOORING**, and **ADHESIVES** used for installing floor tile. Sanding tiles can release fibers. So may scraping or sanding the backing of sheet flooring during removal.
- ▶ **CEMENT SHEET, MILLBOARD, and PAPER** used as insulation around furnaces and woodburning stoves. Repairing or removing appliances may release asbestos fibers. So may cutting, tearing, sanding, drilling or sawing insulation.
- ▶ **DOOR GASKETS** in furnaces, wood stoves, and coal stoves. Worn seals can release asbestos fibers during use.
- ▶ **SOUNDPROOFING OR DECORATIVE MATERIAL** sprayed on walls and ceilings. Loose, crumbly, or water-damaged material may release fibers. So will sanding, drilling or scraping the material.
- ▶ **PATCHING AND JOINT COMPOUNDS** for walls and ceilings, and **TEXTURED PAINTS**. Sanding, scraping, or drilling these surfaces may release asbestos.
- ▶ **ASBESTOS CEMENT ROOFING, SHINGLES, and SIDING**. These products are not likely to release asbestos fibers unless sawed, drilled or cut.
- ▶ **ARTIFICIAL ASHES AND EMBERS** sold for use in gas-fired fireplaces. Also, other older household products such as **FIREPROOF GLOVES, STOVE-TOP PADS, IRONING BOARD COVERS, and certain HAIRDRYERS**.
- ▶ **AUTOMOBILE BRAKE PADS AND LININGS, CLUTCH FACINGS, and GASKETS**.

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## WHAT SHOULD BE DONE ABOUT ASBESTOS IN THE HOME?

If you think asbestos may be in your home, don't panic. Usually the best thing is to leave asbestos material that is in good condition alone.

Generally, material in good condition will not release asbestos fibers.

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. Check with local health, environmental, or other appropriate officials to find out proper handling and disposal procedures.

If asbestos material is more than slightly damaged, or if you are going to make changes in your home that might disturb it, repair or removal by a professional is needed. Before you have your house remodeled, find out whether asbestos materials are present.

## HOW TO MANAGE AN ASBESTOS PROBLEM

If the asbestos material is in good shape and will not be disturbed, do nothing! If it is a problem, there are two types of corrections: repair and removal.

Repair usually involves either sealing or covering asbestos material.

- ▶ **Sealing** (encapsulation) involves treating the material with a sealant that either binds the asbestos fibers together or coats the material so fibers are not released. Pipe, furnace and boiler insulation can sometimes be repaired this way. This should be done only by a professional trained to handle asbestos safely.
- ▶ **Covering** (enclosure) involves placing something over or around the material that contains asbestos to prevent release of fibers. Exposed insulated piping may be covered with a protective wrap or jacket.

With any type of repair, the asbestos remains in place. Repair is usually cheaper than removal, but it may make later removal of asbestos, if necessary, more difficult and costly. Repairs can either be major or minor.

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