

Workplace Health and Safety Queensland

Play it safe with asbestos: tips for property managers

If any of the properties you manage were built before 1990, it is likely that they will contain asbestos. This information will help you to take the right steps when a rental property needs repair or renovation work. Protect yourself, your workers, tenants and the property's neighbours by following these simple tips whenever you contract tradespeople for work.

This fact sheet will help you to identify if asbestos is an element of risk in a property's repair or renovation.

The law prohibits certain activities on asbestos containing materials and also requires certain actions when working around or on asbestos containing materials. There are serious penalties for non-compliance—fines can be issued and prosecution may occur.

Incorrect removal of asbestos materials can cost hundreds of thousands of dollars to clean up. This can include the removal, disposal and replacement of anything that comes into contact with asbestos fibres e.g. soil, plants, toys, clothing and soft furnishings.

What is asbestos?

Asbestos is a naturally occurring mineral made up of strong fibres that have fire, heat and chemical resistant properties. Asbestos fibres are 50-200 times thinner than a human hair, can float in the air for a long time, are invisible to the naked eye, and can be breathed into the lungs.

Why is asbestos dangerous?

Asbestos can pose a risk if fibres become airborne, are inhaled and reach deep into the lungs in sufficient quantities. These fibres are a major health hazard and can cause serious asbestos-related diseases that can take decades to become apparent.

Breathing in asbestos fibres has been linked to three respiratory diseases:

- Asbestosis (progressive and irreversible scarring of lung tissue that impairs breathing)
- Lung cancer
- Mesothelioma (a cancer of the linings around the lungs and abdomen).

Bonded asbestos materials (e.g. fibro) that are in good condition (i.e. undamaged) do not pose a health risk if left undisturbed.

How do I know if the property I manage contains asbestos?

It is often very difficult to identify the presence of asbestos by sight. While asbestos is now banned from use, it was a component of thousands of different products and building materials used in the community and industry from the 1940s until the late 1980s.

As a general rule, if a house was built:

- before the mid 1980s, it is **highly likely** that it would have some materials containing asbestos
- between the mid 1980s and 1990, it is **likely** that it would have materials containing asbestos
- after 1990, it is **highly unlikely** it would have materials containing asbestos.

The only way to be certain is to have a sample of the material analysed. Take a sample of anything you suspect may contain asbestos to an accredited laboratory for analysis by a competent person.

Where is asbestos commonly found in houses?

Asbestos materials used in houses are normally bonded with other materials and are commonly referred to as fibro, asbestos cement, or AC sheeting. Common products/trade names include *hardiplank*, *super six roof sheeting*, *millboard*, *asbestos insulating board*, and *asbestolux*. Loose friable 'unbonded' asbestos is sometimes found in lagging or as a backing material to vinyl sheet flooring.

To see the many common locations of materials containing asbestos in houses, download the free poster from the Workplace Health and Safety Queensland website or refer to '*Asbestos: A home renovator's and tradesperson's guide for minor work in domestic buildings*'.

Tips to manage asbestos risks

There are a range of things you can do to safely manage exposure to asbestos:

- ✓ **Always** identify materials that might contain asbestos before contracting tradespeople to undertake work.
- ✓ If in doubt, **always** arrange for testing of materials before work starts.
- ✓ **Always** liaise with tradespeople to ensure they undertake work safely and in compliance with health and safety legislation.
- ✓ **Always** ensure the removal of more than 10m² of bonded asbestos is only undertaken by a holder of a class B certificate.
- ✓ **Always** consult tenants and if relevant, neighbours, about the work to be undertaken and any precautions required before the work begins.
- ✓ **Always** discuss with property owners and tradespeople alternatives to removing

asbestos containing material (e.g. paint or sealing using an appropriate product, covering with a suitable non-asbestos product).

- ✓ **Always** leave undamaged asbestos material intact and undisturbed.
- ✓ **Always** ensure the removal of all loose friable asbestos containing materials is only undertaken by a holder of a class A certificate.

There are also unsafe work methods that you should never use:

- ✗ **Never use** dry brooms or paint scrapers on uncoated asbestos materials.
- ✗ **Never use** power tools such as angle grinders, circular saws and electric sanders on asbestos containing materials.
- ✗ **Never use** high pressure water blasters on asbestos containing materials.
- ✗ **Never use** compressed air on asbestos containing materials e.g. domestic grade vacuum cleaners and leaf blowers.

Check to see that tradespeople are doing the right thing when working with anything thought to contain asbestos.

More information

The Workplace Health and Safety website www.worksafe.qld.gov.au has the following available for free download:

- domestic asbestos locations poster
- '*Asbestos: A home renovator's and tradesperson's guide for minor work in domestic buildings*'
- general information on asbestos removal and safety.

Alternatively, please call the WHS Infoline on 1300 369 91

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