

Asbestos Risks in Older Homes

A Bit of History and Information

Asbestos is a naturally occurring mineral that's found in the form of long thin fibers. These fibers are easy to work with and can be added to a lot of different products. It is believed that even the ancient Greeks used asbestos to make some fabrics. Often, these were used as cleaning rags that could be thrown into the fire and come out clean. It is also believed that they would use asbestos fabric to wrap the bodies of the dead so when they cremated the body it wouldn't get mixed up with the ashes from the wood.

Asbestos has many positive qualities that make it incredibly useful. It's found in natural deposits all over the world and is very easy to mine, which makes it cheap. It's fireproof and heat resistant, won't conduct electricity, doesn't react with most chemicals and is very strong. The most common use for asbestos was in insulation materials. As the Industrial Age got rolling in the late 1800's, it was used to insulate pipes and different machines. Not only were many factories built using asbestos, it was also popular in the shipping industry. Since asbestos won't burn and is excellent for sound dampening, it was often placed in the walls of ships.



Asbestos was once very widely used in shipyards

With all of these positive qualities, asbestos has one major drawback. It's very dangerous to living beings. Asbestos is a friable material, which means it easily crumbles and breaks apart. Once asbestos has been exposed to the air, the fibers tend to float, like dust, where it can be inhaled and swallowed by anyone passing through the area. The asbestos fibers then settle into the lungs, where they stay. After a number of years, the lungs scar from the constant contact with the fibers. The tissue in the lungs begins to die, which can make breathing very difficult for the victim. Asbestosis, which is the medical name for this condition, can be deadly. It is, however, treatable if caught early enough, but not curable.

Those suffering from asbestosis have a higher risk of contracting [asbestos related cancer](#) and [mesothelioma](#). The fibers are a carcinogen that affects the mesothelium, or the lining that covers and protects many of the organs in the chest and stomach. Mesothelioma is incredibly deadly, most individuals that develop mesothelioma have an

average lifespan of eighteen months after diagnosis, and there is no known cure, yet. Asbestos has been banned in many countries since the mid-1980s.

Uses in Residential Construction

Asbestos was used in home construction as insulation, as well. There were also a number of other products that had asbestos added to increase their strength and usability. Both floor tiles and ceiling tiles contained asbestos, as did some materials used to construct countertops. Wallboard and many of the substance used to add texture to the walls had asbestos fibers added. Roofing shingles and the tar used to patch around protuberances in the roof and holes were made with the mineral.

How to Spot Asbestos

There aren't any products that look like asbestos, so, if you see small fibers sticking out of broken products, it's most likely dangerous. If your house was built before the mid 1970's, there are most likely at least a few areas that might be hot, as far as asbestos goes. If you have pipes that are wrapped in what looks like thick white tape, it is very likely asbestos.



Asbestos tape on pipes



Asbestos roofing shingles appear similar to these



Plaster wall and ceiling treatments commonly contained asbestos during the 60s and 70s in particular.

If the insulation has been disturbed or has a hole in the tape, make sure to stay away from it and do your best not to disturb it.

What to Do About It

It is almost unanimously suggested that you let the experts deal with any asbestos in your home. Actually, the first suggestion is to just leave it alone. Asbestos is safe as long as the fibers are not airborne. Unless you absolutely have to rip out that wallboard or remove the texture, don't. Painting over it will help keep the asbestos contained and freshen up the walls. The same thing is true of ceiling and floor tiles. Now, if your roofing material hasn't been changed in the past thirty years, you may have a whole other set of problems, besides dealing with the asbestos.

If that isn't a viable solution, then the best idea is to hire a professional who has been certified for asbestos abatement. They are going to know how to remove the asbestos without allowing any of the fibers to stick around and, possibly, infect the heating and cooling systems in your home, and they are going to have the equipment to do it. Most likely, there are going to be contractors in your area that have been certified in asbestos removal. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) sets up guidelines for certifying these contractors. In most cases, the ads you find for contractors in the phone book will state whether they are certified for asbestos abatement, or not. If there aren't any ads that help you, you can most likely contact your local building codes office and they can let you know what services are available in your area.

For more information on asbestos exposure and risks, such as [malignant mesothelioma](http://www.asbestos.com), please visit The Asbestos and Mesothelioma Center at www.asbestos.com.