



Asbestos in the Home

General consumer advice regarding asbestos-containing products found in many homes is presented below. The answers to these frequently asked questions about asbestos are based on information from the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). For detailed or current information on asbestos, and other environmental issues, visit the websites of these governmental agencies.

What is asbestos?

Asbestos is a naturally occurring mineral found in rocks. There are several kinds of asbestos, all of which are fire resistant and do not easily degrade by natural processes.

Is asbestos dangerous?

Asbestos has been shown to cause cancer of the lung and stomach according to numerous studies of workers and others regularly exposed to asbestos. Some asbestos materials can break into small fibers, which can float in the air and be inhaled. You cannot see these tiny fibers. They are so small that they pass through the filters of normal heating, ventilation or air conditioning systems or vacuum cleaners and reenter the air. Once inhaled, asbestos fibers can become lodged in tissue for a long time. After many years, cancer can develop. Mesothelioma is one type of cancer that can develop from asbestos exposure. There is no level of asbestos exposure that experts can assure is completely safe.

Are all products with asbestos a health risk for the consumer?

Generally, in order to be a health risk, asbestos fibers must be released from the material and be present in the air for people to breathe. Soft, easily crumbled asbestos-containing materials present the greatest risk for the release of asbestos fibers and therefore represent the greatest potential health risks.

Do all people exposed to asbestos develop asbestos-related disease?

Most people exposed to small amounts of asbestos do not develop any related health problems. Studies of workers and others regularly exposed to asbestos, however, show that these individuals have the greatest chances of developing serious illnesses, including lung cancer, as a result of their exposure.

Why is asbestos used in products?

Asbestos has been used for the worthwhile properties it adds to many products. There are four primary benefits: (1) to strengthen the material used to make the product; (2) to improve the thermal resistance properties of a product; (3) for thermal or acoustical insulation or decoration on exposed surfaces; and (4) for fire protection. Unfortunately, it was eventually discovered that the trade off was the health risks.

(Continued)

Asbestos in the Home (continued)

Where is asbestos found in the home?

Asbestos has been used in a wide variety of household products and building materials, such as heating appliances, ceiling and wall coverings, ceiling coatings, floor tiles and coverings, roofing materials, water and heat pipe insulation, and in some cases, even house insulation.

How can I tell if I have asbestos in my home?

In most cases, there is no way to confirm whether asbestos is present in building materials, other than to have a sample analyzed in a laboratory. In some cases, if the manufacturer of a product can be located, they may be able to verify whether it contains asbestos based on the model number, age. Or some other factors. In some cases, individuals who have frequently worked with asbestos (such as plumbers, building contractors, or heating contractors) often are able to provide some information as to whether or not a product is likely asbestos-containing; however, verification still requires an analysis.

What does it mean when asbestos is reported to be friable?

A material that can become airborne with hand pressure is considered to be "friable." Friable asbestos-containing materials represent the greatest concern for human exposure to asbestos in a residential setting.

If asbestos is found in my home, what should I do?

The concern over exposure to asbestos is greatest when there is a high percent of asbestos in the product and it is

damaged or friable. In many cases, the risk of exposure may be lowest when asbestos-containing materials are undisturbed. If it is necessary to work with or around asbestos-containing materials, such as when renovation or demolition work is performed, certain asbestos-abatement procedures must be followed to reduce the chance of exposure.

What is recommended when suspect asbestos materials are present on a heating system?

Many hot heating pipes, heat ducts, and heating units in older homes (pre-1980s) were covered with asbestos-containing materials. If undamaged, it may be feasible to leave the insulation in place and maintain it. If damaged, or to minimize future asbestos concerns, it can either be repaired and encapsulated, or removed. In any case, it would be best to have it assessed by an asbestos specialist as a precaution.

Who is most qualified to work with asbestos?

A trained and licensed asbestos abatement contractor is the professional most qualified to repair, encapsulate or remove asbestos-containing materials. The contractor should follow established guidelines for handling and disposing of asbestos. In general, home repair contractors are not experienced or licensed in the proper procedures for handling asbestos.

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