

Workplace Health and Safety Queensland

How to handle asbestos safely after a storm

Houses and workplaces built before 1990 are likely to contain asbestos. However, you can't tell if materials contain asbestos just by looking at them, so you should assume that it is asbestos and treat it as such. Although asbestos can have dangerous health effects, it is safe if handled correctly.

It is essential to protect yourself and others when removing debris particularly when asbestos is concerned. Everyone must take great care as asbestos fibres can be released through sawing, drilling or breaking up of asbestos products.

This fact sheet provides information on steps you should follow when removing asbestos-containing materials after a storm, and details how to safely dispose of asbestos waste.

What is asbestos?

Asbestos is a naturally occurring mineral containing strong fibres that have excellent durability, fire resistance and insulating properties. Asbestos is a known carcinogen (can cause cancer) but can only pose a health risk if fibres, small enough to be breathed into our lungs, become airborne and are inhaled.

Where is asbestos found?

As a general rule, if your house was built:

- after 1990 it is **highly unlikely** it would contain building materials that contain asbestos
- between the mid 1980s and 1990 it is **likely** that it would contain building materials that contain asbestos
- before the mid 1980s it is **more than likely** that it would contain building materials that contain asbestos.

The most commonly found household building materials that may contain asbestos are products such as:

- flat or corrugated sheeting (commonly called 'fibro' or 'AC sheeting')
- water or flue pipes
- roof shingles
- flexible building boards
- imitation brick cladding
- plaster patching compounds
- textured paint
- vinyl floor tiles
- backing of linoleum floor coverings.

Asbestos fibres may also be found in a few older forms of insulation used in domestic heaters and stoves, and in ceiling insulation products. Ceiling insulation containing asbestos was generally used in commercial buildings.

Can I remove asbestos from my home myself?

You should be cautious when removing asbestos from your property. Asbestos poses a health risk during removal, packaging, transport and disposal, so it's important to handle it safely.

Friable asbestos (easily broken) is extremely dangerous and must only be removed by a licensed professional. The health risks associated with handling this type of material are far greater than for bonded (firmly-bound) asbestos.

You should call 1300QH INFO (1300 744 636) for further advice regarding asbestos removal from your home.

How should I remove and dispose of asbestos?

To handle and remove asbestos safely:

- Do not use high-speed abrasive or pneumatic tools such as angle grinders, sanders, saws or high-speed drills.

- Use non-powered hand tools or low-speed battery-powered tools, which can be used in conjunction with wet methods (saturating the asbestos product using a manually controlled low pressure course spray of water, e.g. garden hose with adjustable pistol grip). Wet methods can only be used when there are no electrical hazards present so it is safest to turn off all electricity where you are working to prevent electrocution.
- Wet fibro gently with water during its removal. Take care on roofs because fibro is brittle and it is slippery when wet.
- Never cut into a fibro sheet. Instead remove the entire sheet and replace it with a non-asbestos product.
- Don't break fibro sheets because asbestos fibres can be released.
- Don't use compressed air to clean down any surfaces contaminated with asbestos. This only disperses fibres into the air.
- If possible, polythene sheeting to be at least 0.2 mm thick (for example heavy duty builders' plastic).
- Do not use domestic vacuum cleaners or brooms to clean up asbestos dusts. Wet down all dust and wipe it up with cleaning rags. The inhalable asbestos fibres are too fine to be captured by the filtering mechanism in regular domestic vacuum cleaners. Only industrial vacuum cleaners that comply with Australian Standard 3544 fitted with high efficiency particle filters (HEPA) can be used.
- Use damp rags to clean surfaces. Do not resoak used rags in buckets of water as this will contaminate the water. Instead either fold the rag so the clean surface is exposed or use a new rag. Used disposable coveralls, respirators and rags should be placed in bags and sealed for removal with other asbestos waste. Contact your local council or authority for approved disposal sites.

Protect yourself and others

- Wear disposable coveralls and gloves. Wear an approved particulate respirator in the work area, such as a disposable class P1 or P2 (this will be marked on the product packaging). Ordinary dust masks, such as those with a single strap are not effective in preventing the inhalation of asbestos fibres and dust and therefore should not be used.
- Thoroughly wash your hands, and shower and wash your hair after handling asbestos-cement products.
- Avoid walking on corrugated asbestos-cement roofs.
- Keep household members and pets away from the area until the work is completed.

Dispose of asbestos properly

- Stack sheets carefully on two layers of polythene sheeting, then, wrap and seal into bundles for disposal, or place directly into disposal bins that have been lined with polythene sheeting and seal for disposal.
- When stacking sheets, do not slide one sheet over another as this may release asbestos fibres.
- All waste containing asbestos is to be kept wet, double-wrapped in polythene or otherwise sealed, and removed from the site as soon as practicable.

- Call your local authority to remove asbestos waste. Clearly label packages to identify the contents as follows:

Caution — Asbestos. Do not open or damage bag. Do not inhale dust.

Further information

Queensland Health's *Asbestos—A home renovators guide* provides information for homeowners and can be downloaded from www.health.qld.gov.au/.

For more information on asbestos in the workplace visit www.worksafe.qld.gov.au or call the Workplace Health and Safety Infoline on 1300 369 915.

Visit the website to download these factsheets:

- Identifying and recording asbestos in the workplace
- Air monitoring when removing asbestos
- Clearance inspections for asbestos work areas
- Asbestos flooring

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