

How to Deal With and Safely Remove Asbestos

If you live in a home that was built prior to 1980, there is a good chance that you will find asbestos in your home. Many of the materials that were used in building homes before 1980 contained asbestos because of its insulating and fire-resistant properties. It was used in ceiling and wall plasters, wallboard, floor and ceiling tiles, floor mastics, some vinyl floor backings and many other places.

In most cases, there is no danger from the asbestos in your home. As long as the materials that contain the asbestos are intact and undamaged, there is no reason to worry. Asbestos is only a health hazard when tiny fibers of it become airborne. This can happen if you disturb asbestos containing materials during renovations or repairs, or if a material containing asbestos becomes damaged.

What to Do if You Think Your Home Contains Asbestos

Unless the materials containing asbestos are clearly labeled, it's very difficult to identify them. A licensed asbestos surveyor can test materials that you suspect contain asbestos. Testing for asbestos yourself is not recommended because of the danger of releasing asbestos fibers into the air while obtaining samples. If you choose not to have testing done, you should assume that the material does contain asbestos and treat it with all safety precautions listed below.

Completely removing materials that contain asbestos is a last resort because of the risk of releasing asbestos fibers. There are several other ways to deal with asbestos in your home safely without the need to remove it. The EPA recommends the following:

- If the material is not damaged or likely to be disturbed, just leave it alone. Any attempt to remove it increases the risk that asbestos will be released into the air.
- Encapsulate the material. Encapsulation is a method of sealing the surface of materials that contain asbestos to prevent fibers from becoming airborne. Encapsulation is suitable if the material is in good repair and is not soft or crumbly. It is not recommended for material that has begun to deteriorate.
- Enclose (cover) the asbestos containing material. Covering involves putting something over or around the asbestos containing material, such as a sleeve over asbestos pipe insulation or a new floor over an existing one of asbestos tiles.

Repairing asbestos with methods like encapsulation or enclosure should both be done by professionals with training and licensing. You can find a licensed professional in the Yellow Pages under Asbestos Removal.

Removing Asbestos

In general, removing asbestos-containing materials from your home yourself is not recommended. Asbestos is extremely hazardous, and there is no safe level of exposure to asbestos. Even a few fibers have the potential to be inhaled and eventually cause asbestosis, mesothelioma or another cancer. For additional information on asbestos cancer please see the resources at <http://www.asbestos.com/>

Before you consider removing asbestos from your home yourself, consider the following cautions:

- Never sand, drill or saw asbestos containing materials. Do not use power tools on asbestos containing materials.
- Seek professional advice if you're considering removing materials containing asbestos, or are planning renovations that may disturb materials that contain asbestos.
- Do not attempt to remove asbestos spray coatings, insulation or insulation board by yourself. These are complex jobs that require the training and equipment available to professionals.

Doing it Yourself

In many states, a homeowner may legally remove asbestos containing materials from the home's interior, but not the exterior. It is not recommended unless you are experienced in the techniques described below. If you do choose to attempt asbestos removal as a do-it-yourself project, you'll need to take all safety precautions seriously, and follow them precisely. The EPA and various state organizations have publications available that describe the approved methods for containing asbestos, protecting yourself and your home from contamination and disposing of asbestos properly.

Important Precautions

Before you begin work:

- Clear the area where the asbestos is to be removed to cut down on the risk of contaminating furniture, clothing and other items with asbestos fibers.
- Cover anything that can't be removed with thick polyethylene sheeting.
- Isolate the area where work is to be done from the rest of the house by building a containment area and air lock of polyethylene sheeting.
- Cover walls and floors in the area where asbestos is to be removed with polyethylene sheeting.
- Post signs to alert visitors, family and friends of the work in process and the possible exposure risk.

Protecting yourself while you work:

- Wear a respirator that is approved for asbestos removal at all times that you are in the containment area.
- Wear a disposable coverall, disposable rubber gloves, rubber boots and protective eye goggles the entire time that you are in the containment area.
- Remove all protective clothing and gear inside the air lock before you leave the containment area. This will prevent the spread of asbestos fibers outside the containment area.

While working with asbestos:

- Keep other people away from the working area.
- When possible, saturate the material to be removed with water containing dishwashing liquid to help reduce the dust created by the work.

- Always remove asbestos containing materials whole if possible. Do not break up components or sheets.
- Have an adequate supply of waste bags approved for asbestos disposal on hand.

Handling Asbestos During Removal

- Never handle asbestos with your bare hands. Wear disposable rubber gloves.
- Place all removed materials into asbestos waste disposal bags for later disposal.
- Keep the floor and any debris on it damp while you work to reduce the amount of dust in the air.
- Remove the asbestos without breaking it up.

Cleanup and Decontamination

- Double bag and seal all debris containing asbestos. Use approved bags, and seal each bag separately, then place in a second bag and seal the second bag.
- Wipe down all surfaces with a damp cloth. Do not sweep or use a vacuum to clean up debris that may contain asbestos.
- Carefully fold and roll the polyethylene sheeting on the floor and dispose of it in the same way as the debris (double bagged and sealed).
- Wipe down all tools and equipment with clean, soft rags and water. Do not reuse rags. Dispose of each rag after use and use a new rag to continue cleaning.
- Do not remove protective masks and equipment until all cleanup is completed.
- Bag disposable gloves, coveralls and boots in asbestos waste bags.
- Wash hands and face and shower thoroughly.

Disposal of Asbestos

Asbestos containing waste may only be disposed of at approved landfills that have the capacity to deal with it. Call the state EPA office for a list of approved landfill sites that can handle construction wastes.

- All materials that contain asbestos must be double-bagged and sealed in approved asbestos waste disposal bags printed with the appropriate warnings.
- All asbestos-containing waste must be transported in a covered truck to avoid releasing asbestos dust into the air.

For more information on asbestos exposure and abatement please visit the Mesothelioma Cancer Center (<http://www.asbestos.com/>).