

Fact sheet

March 2010

Asbestos

What exactly is asbestos?

Asbestos is a mineral fibre. In the past, asbestos was mixed with cement to make it stronger and easier to mould into different shapes and sizes, such as fibro sheeting.

Asbestos was also popular because of its fire resistance and insulation qualities.

Is asbestos dangerous?

Asbestos in fibro sheeting can present a health risk if it the sheeting is cut or sanded, causing the physical release of the asbestos fibres.

This material is considered safe if it is left undisturbed and is in good condition.

Asbestos fibres, when inhaled, can cause asbestosis, lung cancer and mesothelioma. The risk of contracting these conditions increases as the amount of asbestos fibres inhaled increases.

People who get health problems from inhaling asbestos have usually been exposed to high levels of asbestos over a very long period of time, such as people who have worked in asbestos mines or who have been employed in the production of fibro sheeting.

Is it still used to build or repair Housing NSW homes?

No. Since 1986, asbestos has been banned for use in building products in NSW.

Fibro sheeting that may contain asbestos is still present in many homes, built before 1986. It was usually used as wall cladding, in eaves and in wet areas such as bathrooms and laundries.

Modern fibrous cement sheeting uses cellulose fibres instead of asbestos

fibres and is considered a safe building material.

Am I in any danger?

The long-term risks of living in a home which contains asbestos products is extremely small relative to other risks experienced in everyday lives.

It is very important to realise that there are very low levels of asbestos in the air that we breathe while going about our day-to-day lives.

What do I do if I suspect there is asbestos material in a home?

A significant number of the homes built before 1986 could contain some form of asbestos cement, irrespective if they are public housing or privately owned homes.

If you think asbestos may be in your home, don't panic! If asbestos material is in good condition, and is left alone, it is harmless.

Generally, material in good condition will not release asbestos fibres. There is no danger unless fibres are released and inhaled into the lungs.

If the area you suspect has asbestos in it starts to show signs of wear or damage, such as tears or abrasions, contact the Housing Contact Centre on 1300 468 746 and report it.

A contractor will then come to your home as soon as possible and inspect the area, and possibly take a sample. If material contains asbestos, Housing NSW will ensure it is either rendered safe or removed.

The residential tenancy agreement signed by you at the beginning of your tenancy states that you are not to alter your home in any way without the permission of Housing NSW. This includes cutting into walls, drilling holes, making repairs and so forth.



If you inform Housing NSW that you are seeking permission to do work on your home that might include disturbing fibro sheeting, Housing NSW will ensure your home is inspected and tested where required.

What do I do if I think I have been exposed to asbestos dust?

Don't panic. The first thing is to make sure you are not exposed to any more dust. Call the Housing Contact Centre immediately.

If you are worried that you have inhaled dust that may contain asbestos, it may be advisable to see your doctor for peace of mind.

What should I do if I or someone else accidentally has created a hole in some fibro sheeting?

Make sure everyone at your home stays clear of the area and contact the Housing Contact Centre. A contractor will come around as soon as possible and make sure the area is safe, and may take a sample for testing.

Remember, your safety comes first. Any matters as to who should pay for the repairs if you, your children or a friend has caused the hole can be dealt with at a later date.

Are contractors trained to deal with asbestos?

All of Housing NSW's contractors must abide by WorkCover NSW regulations when they handle or move asbestos matter. This means they must be licensed to work with asbestos. If you suspect your contractor is not licensed, or has incorrectly disposed of asbestos matter, please contact the Housing Contact Centre.

Asbestos

Can I transfer out of my home because I think it has asbestos?

No. Housing NSW, on the best advice from NSW Health and WorkCover NSW, considers fibro sheeting safe if it is left unharmed.

I have been drilling holes in my walls to hang pictures. Should I do this?

No. While the possibility of this having any effect on your health is minimal, the slight chance still exists. Please contact the Housing Contact Centre before drilling holes in cement sheeting.

If I find cement sheeting lying on the ground or under my house, what should I do?

Don't touch it. Report it to the Housing Contact Centre, who will organise it to be removed by qualified asbestos handlers.

What do I do if an older house with fibro is being demolished next door?

WorkCover and NSW Health say that living next door to a house with fibro is only a problem when the fibro sheeting is broken or disturbed.

There are some things that neighbours can do to minimise any risk during demolition works. You can

- ask the contractor how long the demolition will take
- note the phone number of the foreman in charge of the demolition and call him if there are any problems
- close your windows and doors that face the property being demolished to prevent dust getting in
- check that the property is securely fenced to prevent access by the public
- make sure that all asbestos cement is removed from the demolished site.

More information

- visit your local office, Monday to Friday, 8.30 am–4.30 pm (closed public holidays and 8.30 am–1.00 pm on Wednesdays). Office hours may vary in some locations
- phone 1300 HOUSING (1300 468 746), 24 hours a day, 7 days a week
- go to the Housing NSW website www.housing.nsw.gov.au

It is illegal for an officer of Housing NSW to ask for money or favours or other benefits of any kind in exchange for helping you with your housing needs.

It is also illegal for you or anyone else to offer money or favours or other benefits of any kind to an officer of Housing NSW in exchange for helping you. If you have any information regarding this, please contact Business Assurance on 1300 HOUSING (1300 468 746). Housing NSW may refuse the provision of further housing services to anyone who has engaged or sought to engage in corrupt or illegal conduct.

Translation service

Arabic	خدمة الترجمة الخطية والشفهية الجانية اتصل على الرقم 131 450
Chinese	免費的翻譯傳譯服務 致電 131 450
Russian	Служба бесплатного письменного и устного перевода Позвоните по номеру 131 450
Spanish	Servicio Gratuito de Traducción e Interpretación Llame al 131 450
Vietnamese	Dịch vụ Phiên dịch và Thông dịch Miễn phí Điện thoại 131 450