

# Working with Asbestos

One in three buildings in Australia are likely to contain asbestos products. As a tradesperson, you are likely to encounter asbestos when undertaking renovation, maintenance or repair work on commercial and residential buildings.

## What you need to know

- Workers need to have had asbestos awareness and management training to be able to safely work with asbestos-containing products
- Licenced asbestos removalists must be used to remove and dispose of asbestos safely
- There are legal regulations for asbestos management, including its removal and disposal, which may vary between states and territories
- Asbestos-containing products that are sealed, undamaged and in good condition pose minimal risk if left undisturbed. It is important to monitor these products over time for any signs of damage.

## What is asbestos?

Asbestos is a group of naturally forming minerals that were widely used in the production of insulation and construction products due to their strength, flexibility, heat resistance and cheap cost for mining and processing. Asbestos has also been used as an additive in paint and sealants, vehicle brake pads and clutches, as well as outdoor furniture. The versatility of asbestos made it attractive to many industries with Australia being one of the highest users of asbestos worldwide.

**Asbestos is a highly toxic material that has impacted the health of thousands of Australians.**

The three most widely used types of asbestos were:

- **Crocidolite:** blue asbestos
- **Amosite:** brown or grey asbestos
- **Chrysotile:** white asbestos.

Asbestos is classified under two categories:

### Friable:

- Soft, loose and can be crumbled into a fine dust with very light pressure, such as crumbling it in your hand
- Contains high levels of asbestos (up to 100%) loosely held in the product, so the asbestos fibres are easily released into the air and inhaled by people nearby
- Example: thermal insulation around pipes.

### Non-friable/bonded:

- Solid, rigid and non-friable
- Bonded with another compound, such as cement, with a small proportion of asbestos (usually less than 15%)
- If undamaged, does not normally release asbestos fibres into the air and is considered low risk
- Example: fibro sheeting.

## Why is asbestos a risk?

When inhaled, asbestos fibres can become lodged in the lung tissue, causing irritation and may lead to asbestos-related lung diseases such as mesothelioma, lung cancer and asbestosis.

Asbestos-related diseases can take many years to develop, in some cases up to 20 to 40 years after first exposure. This is known as the latency period.

## Asbestos in Australia

Approximately one third of all homes built in Australia contain asbestos products. Any home built or renovated prior to 1991 is likely to contain asbestos products.



**A total ban on asbestos products first came into effect in December 2003.**

Asbestos can also be found naturally in soil or rock formations. This may become a risk to workers if disturbed during tasks such as road building, site and construction work, excavation or mining.



**Any worker that is undertaking repairs, maintenance, renovations or other work on buildings and infrastructure that was built or renovated before 2004 is at risk of exposure to asbestos.**

Asbestos may be found in:

 Roof sheeting and capping

 Guttering

 Vinyl flooring

 Carpet and tile underlays

 Carports and sheds

 Packing under beams.

*Note: This is not an exhaustive list.*

Asbestos building products pose a health risk if they are friable or if non-friable products are damaged or unsealed.

## Identifying asbestos

You cannot determine whether a product contains asbestos just by looking at it. The only way to be certain is to get a sample of the product tested by a **National Association of Testing Authorities (NATA)** accredited laboratory. If asbestos products need to be removed\* or tested, licenced asbestos removalists should be used.



*\*In all states and territories, except for ACT, it is legal for anyone to remove up to 10 square meters of bonded asbestos.*

## Managing your risk to asbestos

Commercial and public buildings, and other relevant structures, must have an asbestos register. This register must be regularly maintained and contain the date an asbestos professional identified the asbestos and the location, type and condition of the asbestos. Your employer is responsible for organising this register.

Before you begin work, check if asbestos is present by reviewing the asbestos register. If there is no register, ask an asbestos professional for advice and get them to test a sample.

Residential property owners are not required to keep an asbestos register, so they may not know if asbestos is present in their home.

## Key information

- If you are unable to have an asbestos professional test a sample, always assume the product contains asbestos and take necessary precautions to control your exposure
- If you are self-employed, it is your responsibility to control asbestos exposure
- If you are employed by someone, then it is your employer's responsibility to follow Work Health and Safety legislation to reduce or manage your exposure by using the Hierarchy of Controls



**Asbestos management plans are necessary if asbestos has been identified.**

- Asbestos management plans are designed to assist with the management and control of buildings and other structures to prevent exposure to asbestos by staff and visitors. Plans should include the asbestos register, outline information on how people at risk are informed about asbestos exposure and the control measures used to manage their exposure, as well as responsibilities and training requirements for anyone who works with asbestos. This should be created and managed by the employer and made available to all workers
- It is **illegal** to dispose of asbestos in normal rubbish collection. Asbestos waste must be disposed at an authorised asbestos disposal facility. To find a facility near you, visit [asbestossafety.gov.au](http://asbestossafety.gov.au).



## FURTHER INFORMATION

If you are concerned about your exposure to asbestos consult your GP. It is recommended you talk to your doctor about your exposure, even if you aren't experiencing any symptoms, so they are aware of your risk and can monitor your health. For more information on asbestos visit our **Occupational Lung Disease National Directory** to search information relevant to you and your state or territory.

[Lungfoundation.com.au](http://Lungfoundation.com.au) | Freecall 1800 654 301 | [enquiries@lungfoundation.com.au](mailto:enquiries@lungfoundation.com.au)

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