



What You Need to Know About Asbestos

Unfortunately, asbestos can be found in a myriad of household materials. We'll tell you where to look.

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This Old House TV's Watertown project

Identifying Asbestos

Asbestos. The name has its origin in the Greek word for inextinguishable. A highly-effective and inexpensive fire-retardant material and thermal and acoustic insulator, asbestos was used extensively in home construction from the early 1940s through the 1970s. However, we now know that prolonged exposure to asbestos fibers can lead to lung disease. When disturbed, tiny abrasive asbestos fibers are easily inhaled, which damages lung tissue and can cause cancer. In homes built prior to 1975, asbestos is most commonly found as thermal insulation on basement boilers and pipes. Unfortunately, it can also be found in a myriad of other household materials including:

- Blown-in attic insulation
- Vinyl floor tiles
- Glue that attaches floor tiles to concrete or wood
- Some forms of linoleum
- Window caulking and glazing
- Roofing material (usually on flat roofs but occasionally on shingles)
- HVAC duct insulation (usually found in corrugated or flat paper form)
- Siding material
- Plaster
- Fiber cement siding (usually 1/8" thick and 8'x4' brittle)

- Corrugated heavy duty 8'x4' panels

Some forms of paint The mere presence of asbestos in your home is not hazardous. Generally, material in good condition will not release asbestos fibers and disturbing it may create a health hazard where none existed before. The best thing to do with asbestos material in good condition is leave it alone. The danger comes from asbestos material that has been damaged over time. Asbestos that crumbles easily if handled, or that has been sawed, scraped, or sanded into a powder is likely to release asbestos fibers and create a health hazard. If you suspect a part of your home may contain asbestos, check periodically for tears, abrasions or water damage. If you discover slightly damaged material, limit access to the area and do not touch or disturb it. If asbestos material is more than slightly damaged, or if you are going to make changes in your home that might disturb it, professional repair or removal is needed. Before calling an asbestos abatement contractor, however, you should contact an industrial hygiene firm to inspect the affected area. A proper assessment will include a complete visual examination and careful collection and analysis of samples. If asbestos is present, the inspector should provide a written evaluation describing its location and extent of damage, and give recommendations for correction or prevention. Also, this inspector can perform checks after removal or repair to assure the area has been properly cleaned. With this report in hand, homeowners can then contact an asbestos abatement contractor and negotiate a clean-up plan. Before work begins, get a written contract specifying the work plan, cleanup and the applicable federal, state, and local regulations which the contractor must follow (such as permits, notification requirements and asbestos disposal procedures). You can contact your state and local health departments, the Environmental Protection Agency's regional office and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration's regional office to find out more about these regulations. **Repair and Removal** Repair involves either sealing or covering asbestos material. Sealing (encapsulation) treats the material with a sealant that either binds the asbestos fibers together or coats the material so fibers are not released. Pipe, furnace, and boiler insulation can be repaired this way. Covering (enclosure) involves placing a protective wrap or jacket around the material that contains asbestos to prevent release of fibers. Only a professional trained to handle asbestos safely should undertake these repairs. With any type of repair, the asbestos remains in place. Repair is usually cheaper than removal, but it may make later removal of asbestos, if necessary, more difficult and costly. Repairs can either be major or minor. Doing minor repairs yourself is not recommended; improper handling of asbestos materials creates more problems than it solves. If you decide on removal, be sure to get written assurance from the contractor that he or she has followed all local asbestos removal and disposal laws. Homeowners should also ask for a disposal manifest prior to paying the final bill to verify that the material will be disposed of in a landfill licensed to receive asbestos. Only contractors licensed by the state to perform asbestos abatement activities should undertake its repair and removal. As when hiring any contractor, ask for references and a list of similar projects that the contractor has recently completed. Check with your local air pollution control board, the local agency responsible for worker safety and the Better Business Bureau to see if the firm has had any safety violations. Insist that the contractor use the proper equipment to do the job and that workers wear approved respirators, gloves and other protective clothing. Homeowners should also verify that the contractor has a general liability and workman's compensation policies that cover this type of work. In many states, contractors are required by law to notify federal, state and local agencies that they are about to perform abatement activities. At the end of the job, before the contractor removes its containment system, the industrial hygiene specialist who first evaluated the property should return to take air samples to be sure that no asbestos fibers have accidentally escaped. For further help in dealing with asbestos problems in the home, contact your state's environmental affairs agency. If handled properly, asbestos can be prevented from ever causing a problem in your home.

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