

Between 700 and 800 people are diagnosed with mesothelioma each year in Australia mostly due to exposure to Asbestos. It had been expected that after a peak of deaths of miners and installers of asbestos the number of deaths would start reducing. However, the opposite has occurred, and numbers are increasing.

Why is this?

Asbestos is a very dangerous product. The fibres are light enough to float in the air but when they get into the lungs they embed into the flesh. Once they have embedded into the lungs the body is unable to expel or dissolve them, they cause aggravation and eventually disease in the lungs. Often it takes decades from exposure to asbestos before symptoms appear.

Many now being affected have never worked with asbestos but have come into contact within their own home during renovation, or simply from being in an area where it is being disturbed without the appropriate safety measures being in place. Many of those affected were young children at the time of exposure and the disease becomes evident when they get older.

There are many ways you could be exposed to asbestos in the workplace, but we will consider three common ways you could be affected by asbestos in a residential area:

What is asbestos?

Asbestos is the name used for a group of naturally occurring minerals. They have resistance to high temperatures and fire and make effective insulators and so were popular in building products in Australia from the 1940s to 1987.

Asbestos-containing materials include:

- flat and corrugated sheeting
- cement pipes
- insulation
- floor tiles
- adhesives
- roofing
- automobile parts such as brake pads
- textiles
- textured paints

Australia was one of the highest users of asbestos per capita. Products containing asbestos were phased out during the 1980s, a national ban on asbestos, its importation and all products containing asbestos came into effect at the end of 2003.

What makes asbestos dangerous?

Asbestos fibres are released into the air when people handle asbestos-containing materials with poor safety procedures. Asbestos fibres are around 50 to 200 times thinner than a human hair, can be invisible and be breathed in easily. They can become trapped deep in your lungs and cause damage over a long time.

The two asbestos-containing material groups include:

- Bonded (non-friable) asbestos materials, made up of a bonding agent (such as cement) with asbestos fibres added. They usually contain less than 15% of asbestos and normally do not release fibres unless they are disturbed, damaged or have deteriorated over time.
- Friable (loosely bound) asbestos materials are those which can be crumbled or reduced to powder by hand. Bonded asbestos can become friable if severely fire damaged or crusted. Friable asbestos materials are the most dangerous as the fibres can be released into the air.

1 - DEMOLITION

Demolishing a building without a Demolition Permit is illegal. The purpose of the demolition Permit is to ensure the building will be demolished in a manner that is safe for the demolition contractors, the owners and neighbours of the property and the waste asbestos sheeting is disposed of safely in an Authorised area.

Owners or demolition contractors that intend to demolish a building must obtain a valid Demolition Permit or a photocopy of such before a demolition can proceed.

Using machinery to demolish an Asbestos building is not permitted. Machinery crushes the Asbestos Fibre sheeting and can cause dust to drift onto neighbouring properties. If not done properly small pieces of asbestos sheeting can contaminate a site. An Asbestos building should not be burnt. Fire releases the fibres and distributes them within the smoke.

The Shire of Chittering will not tolerate the illegal demolition or disposal of asbestos sheeting.

The Building Act 2011 states the penalty for demolition without a Demolition Permit is a fine of up to \$50,000.00. The Health (Asbestos) Regulations 1992 have a penalty of up to \$10,000.00 for illegal dumping of asbestos with on the spot fines of up to \$2000.00 for activities such as breaking or cutting asbestos.

The site can also be declared a contaminated site which prevents it being built upon until cleared and certified.

2 - NEGLECT

If left unpainted, or the paint has deteriorated over time, asbestos fibre sheeting will start to shed fibres. Rain and wind can erode the substrate and the fibres will become airborne. Asbestos left on the ground will get crushed by traffic or affected by fire it will then also release the fibres.

All asbestos sheeting should be kept painted. If removed it should be bagged and disposed of at a suitable waste facility. It should not be disposed of with other rubbish.

Vandals also can cause damage to vacant buildings causing risk to themselves and others. The Shire of Chittering may place an order for demolition or repair on buildings that have been damaged and is causing a risk to the surrounding residents.

3 - RENOVATION

It is estimated one-third of all houses built prior to 1990 in Australia contain asbestos. Some sheeting made in the 1980's is very hard to identify as asbestos as looks very similar to Cement/Wood Fibre Board. Asbestos was used in wet areas, under eaves, as an underlay for floor coverings, floor coverings, corrugated roofing and fencing and sometimes all the internal and external lining of a dwelling was Asbestos. When undisturbed and maintained by painting it is not dangerous.

When renovating their home some people have used a grinder to cut doorways through the sheeting or broken a sheet which causes toxic dust. When sheets are removed the dust behind the sheets may contain fibres which, when swept it becomes airborne. The dust is breathed in by the residents of the dwelling and coats surfaces and floors in the building. There is also the potential for young children to breathe in the fibres, or they may touch the fibres on the floor or other surfaces - this can cause disease in the future.

- If in doubt treat all cement fibre sheeting as asbestos.
- Always wear protective clothing and personal safety equipment.
- Remove children from the area before starting asbestos removal.
- Do not break, grind, cut, drill, or burn asbestos fibre sheeting.

Remove sheets whole. Pick up all small pieces of asbestos fibre sheeting from site. Do not sweep, use a Vacuum certified for Asbestos for removal of any dust. If at all possible remove whole areas, walls or fences etc. at once. Wrap asbestos immediately in plastic sheeting.

Contact your Shire of Chittering local waste disposal facility and they will advise you of how and where it can be disposed of.

For further information see Safe Work Australia's guide 'How to Safely Remove Asbestos Code of Practice' (April 2016) at the website link:

<https://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/system/files/documents/1705/mcop-how-to-safely-remove-asbestos-v3.pdf>

Please contact the Shire if you wish to obtain more information on (08) 9576 4600 or email chatter@chittering.wa.gov.au.