

After a fire: asbestos hazards

Community information

This information is being provided to residents and property owners affected by bushfires. It aims to help address concerns about asbestos fibres and should be read with other information about asbestos, provided at the end of this fact sheet.

How do I know if asbestos was used on my property?

Asbestos was commonly used in all types of buildings (including homes and sheds) that were built before 1990. It was used mostly in asbestos cement (AC) in walls and in roofs, floor underlays, eaves and chimney flues, and also in vinyl floor tiles and as backing to lino.

Is asbestos dangerous?

AC building products are usually made up of 5–15 per cent asbestos by weight. Since the mid-1980s, cement sheeting has been produced in Australia without any asbestos content. If the material is thought to be older than 1990, it is reasonable to assume that it contains asbestos, and testing is not generally required. The asbestos in these products is tightly bound because they contain cement and are compressed in manufacturing.

Many studies have shown that levels of hazardous fibres freely released from these products are very low. However, during activities such as power sawing, sanding and drilling, breathable fibres can be released into the air. Do not undertake any such activities with these products without specialist advice.

Asbestos fibres create a health risk when inhaled into the lungs. Fibres that stay attached to cement or in ash and debris caused by a fire do not pose a health risk to visitors to the building or to the general public unless the fibres are disturbed and then breathed in.

My house was damaged by fire. Am I at risk from asbestos fibres?

Research has shown that house fires involving asbestos-containing materials do not result in levels of asbestos fibres in the surrounding area high enough to cause a risk to health. This is because during a fire the amount of asbestos fibres released into the air is relatively low.

However, asbestos clumps and some fibres may remain on the property and cause a risk if the ash or debris is disturbed and inhaled.

If you are just visiting a property **but not cleaning up**, a protective kit can be worn to minimise exposure to airborne dust and other hazards from fire-damaged homes. Protective kits for bushfire-affected home owners are available from your local council.

If asbestos-containing materials have been burnt on your property or you are uncertain, a licensed asbestos removalist should be arranged to perform the clean-up work. This can be organised through your local council.

For further information

Better Health Channel 2016, *Asbestos and your health*

www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au/health/healthyliving/asbestos-and-your-health

enHealth 2013, *Asbestos: A guide for householders and the general public*

www2.health.vic.gov.au/public-health/environmental-health/environmental-health-in-the-home/asbestos-in-the-home

Noel Arnold & Associates 2006, *Report on the investigation of the effect of fire on asbestos fibre contamination*

www2.noel-arnold.com.au/content/uploads/pdfs/Articles/Fire/Asbestos%20info%20for%20web.pdf

Community fact sheets related to bushfires

www2.health.vic.gov.au/emergencies/emergency-type/natural-disasters/bushfire-factsheets

For further information and advice, contact the environmental health section of your local council.