

General information about asbestos

Q. What is asbestos?

A. Asbestos is a naturally occurring fibrous material and has been used for about 150 years on a large scale. It is versatile, plentiful and ideal as a fire-proofing and insulation material. But it can be deadly!

The three main types of asbestos that have been used commercially are:

- Crocidolite (blue)
- Amosite (brown)
- Chrysotile (white)

Important: All are dangerous, but blue and brown asbestos are known to be more dangerous than white. You will need a laboratory to properly identify the different types of asbestos.

Q. Why is it dangerous?

A. If you inhale asbestos fibres (which are long and thin) they can become lodged in the tissue of your chest and your body's natural defences may not be able to easily break them down. This can lead to lung diseases (mainly cancers), particularly if you are repeatedly exposed to fibres over a number of years.

Important: Generally, asbestos is only a risk if you disturb or damage it and cause fibres to be released into the air. If asbestos containing materials are in good condition and in a position where they are not going to be disturbed or damaged then it is safer to leave them where they are and ensure that the risks are managed.

Q. Is white asbestos safe?

No. The carcinogenic risk from chrysotile (white asbestos) has been evaluated by the International Agency for Research on Cancer and it is considered to be a category 1 human carcinogen. HSE's view is that there is sufficient evidence that chrysotile causes cancer in humans but that there is some uncertainty as to the scale of the risk.

HSE recognises that the risks to human health associated with chrysotile are lower than those associated with amphibole asbestos (blue, brown etc) but that does not imply that chrysotile does not cause cancer.

There are also very good practical reasons for adopting a precautionary approach. In particular, even though the content of many materials that contain asbestos is predominantly chrysotile, such materials often contain small quantities of amphibole asbestos impurities and even intentionally added amphiboles.

Q. What are the likely health effects?

A. Exposure to asbestos can cause three main diseases:

- Asbestosis: irreversible scarring of the lungs;
- Lung cancer: increased incidence, particularly if you smoke;
- Mesothelioma: cancer of the lining of the lungs or stomach.

Important: All of these diseases have no cure – mesothelioma and lung cancer are fatal diseases. Typically, there can be a 15–60 years gap between first exposure and diagnosis.

Q. Where is it normally found?

A. Asbestos was used in hundreds of different products and buildings from the 1950's to the mid 1980's. Asbestos cement was used up until 1999 in a variety of different premises and materials. Any building that was constructed or had major refurbishment between the 1950's and mid 80's is likely to contain some type of asbestos containing material. Use of asbestos peaked in the 60's and early 70's – premises built or refurbished during this time are the most likely to contain some form of asbestos.