



Asbestos

What is asbestos?

Asbestos refers to a group of naturally occurring, fibrous minerals. Asbestos was once widely used in building supplies and other consumer products. Research shows asbestos fibers can cause major breathing problems and cancer.¹ Old and brittle asbestos products can release tiny, even microscopic, fibers. These fibers can remain suspended in the air and enter your lungs when you inhale. Airborne asbestos fibers have no odor or taste. Because of the health risks, the federal government has banned the use of asbestos in certain products, but it can still be used in others.²

What are the sources of asbestos?

Deteriorating, damaged or disturbed products—such as insulation, fireproofing, acoustical materials and floor tiles—may be sources of airborne asbestos indoors.¹ When asbestos-containing materials are disturbed, tiny fibers break off and are suspended in the air. These fibers may remain airborne for long periods of time before settling in dust.

People working with or around asbestos (miners, asbestos abatement workers, custodial and maintenance workers, and insulation workers) face greater risk of exposure. If proper safety precautions—masks and coverings—are not used, workers may carry asbestos fibers to their homes and families.³

How does asbestos impact health?

Asbestos can cause cancer. Inhaling asbestos fibers increases the risk of developing [lung cancer](#) and [mesothelioma](#), a deadly cancer of the thin lining surrounding the lungs and other organs.^{1,2} The risk depends on how much you inhale, how long ago you were exposed and whether you smoke. Smoking cigarettes, in addition to inhaling asbestos, increases your chances of developing lung cancer.³

When you inhale asbestos, the tiny fibers enter your air passages. Your body's natural defenses remove most of these particles. The majority will be carried away or coughed up in a layer of mucus that protects your lungs. However, some fibers may bypass those defenses and lodge deep within your lungs. Those fibers can remain in place for a very long time and may never be removed. Most of the harmful impacts of asbestos will not be seen immediately. They often develop years after exposure occurs.¹

Exposure to high concentrations of airborne asbestos over long periods can create non-cancerous problems in the lungs and chest. Such exposure also can scar tissue in the lungs, in a condition called [asbestosis](#).³ The scar tissue does not behave like normal, healthy lung tissue and makes breathing difficult. Asbestosis is a very serious and life-threatening disease. Fortunately, most people who are only exposed to moderate levels of asbestos are not likely to develop these more serious diseases.¹

How can you protect yourself from asbestos?

If you know or suspect there is asbestos in your home or workplace, leave the material alone if possible. Asbestos-containing materials are safe as long as they are in good condition and not disturbed. Fibers are unlikely to become airborne unless materials are cut, ripped or sanded. If you need to remodel, remove or clean up asbestos, be sure to hire trained professionals.¹

If a material is damaged and you suspect it may contain asbestos, limit access to the area. Do not try to take samples yourself to see if it is asbestos. That sampling can do more damage than leaving the material alone. Consult a trained professional. Sealing or covering the exposed material often can be a better option than removal.¹

- Sources

1. U.S. EPA. [Learn About Asbestos](#).
2. U.S. EPA. [U.S. Federal Bans on Asbestos](#).
3. Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registrar (ATSDR). [Asbestos: Health Effects](#).
4. U.S. EPA. [Asbestos: Protect Your Family](#).