

# After a fire: Asbestos hazards

Publication 1719.3 | Fact sheet | January 2020

## Overview

The term 'asbestos' refers to a group of naturally occurring minerals found in rock. White, blue and brown asbestos were all mined in Australia until 1983.

Asbestos was used widely in industrial and commercial applications from the late 1800s. Uses included asbestos cement (AC) building materials, roofing tiles, fire blankets, and brake linings and pads for motor vehicles.

Asbestos cement was commonly used in the construction of residential buildings from the 1940s – houses built before 1990 are likely to have some asbestos cement products.

Many of these changes are the result of issues identified by councils. They will improve council's ability to effectively regulate residential noise, onsite wastewater management systems, and litter and other waste.

These changes will become law at different times. The first changes become law on 7 September 2022. Others will become law on a date to be proclaimed, but no later than 1 June 2023.

## What are the health risks of asbestos?

Asbestos only poses a risk to health when asbestos fibres are inhaled as dust.

Asbestos cement materials that are in good condition don't pose a health risk, because the asbestos fibres are bound together.

If the material is damaged or crumbling, or has been disturbed by cutting, drilling or sawing, fibres may be released into the air and pose a health risk.

Asbestos fibres must become airborne and be present in sufficient concentration and be of a respirable size (a size that can be breathed in) to pose a risk to those inhaling fibres.

When the fibres are inhaled, they can remain deep in the lungs, causing scarring and inflammation. Asbestos exposure can increase the risk of some forms of cancer in humans.

More information about the health risks of asbestos is available at [asbestos.vic.gov.au](http://asbestos.vic.gov.au)



### Asbestos only poses a risk to health when fibres are inhaled

By minimising your exposure to bushfire rubble that may contain asbestos, you minimise inhalation of asbestos fibres.

[epa.vic.gov.au](http://epa.vic.gov.au)

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## What happens to asbestos during and after a fire?

During a fire, the amount of asbestos fibres released into the air is relatively low. Air monitoring during and after fires has confirmed this.

After a fire, pieces of asbestos cement materials can become brittle and may release fibres if they are disturbed while cleaning up.

Where it's suspected that materials containing asbestos are likely to be present, cleanup should be conducted in line with WorkSafe requirements.

## My home burnt down. How do I know if the building rubble contains asbestos? What should I do to protect myself while inspecting building rubble?

Asbestos cement used to be commonly used in the construction of residential buildings. As a result, approximately a third of Australian homes may contain some form of asbestos.

A total ban on the manufacture, use, reuse, importation, transportation, storage and sale of all forms of asbestos came into force in 2003. Houses built after 2003 should not contain asbestos.

We recommend you do not inspect burnt building rubble. If you do decide to inspect building rubble you should wet it down to prevent dust. You should also wear personal protective equipment (called PPE, it typically consists of dust mask, gloves and coveralls).

More information is available from [asbestos.vic.gov.au](http://asbestos.vic.gov.au)

## Where can I get a personal protective kit?

The Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) can provide personal protective kits to community members who want to inspect their fire-affected properties.

These kits are designed to protect you while searching for personal items. They are not designed to use during site cleanup, including removal of asbestos.

You can collect kits from local relief centres or local councils.

## I'm still living in my house but my neighbour's house burnt down. How can I best protect myself from airborne asbestos fibres?

Talk to your neighbour to see if they know about asbestos at their property. Encourage your neighbour to wet down burnt building rubble and keep you informed of any upcoming activities which may generate dust.

If your neighbour's house contains asbestos, encourage them to engage a licenced asbestos removalist to safely remove and dispose of the material.

More information is available from [asbestos.vic.gov.au](http://asbestos.vic.gov.au).

## What is the safest way to clear burnt asbestos-containing material from a property?

We recommend that you use a licensed asbestos removalist to perform the cleanup work. They know how to remove and dispose of asbestos safely, and without risk to you and your neighbours.

If you are using a contractor to remove asbestos, they must be licensed by WorkSafe Victoria. Their website ([worksafe.vic.gov.au/asbestos](http://worksafe.vic.gov.au/asbestos)) has a list of licensed asbestos removalists or you can search online.

If you're considering doing the cleanup yourself, you should follow guidelines available for homeowners on [asbestos.vic.gov.au](https://asbestos.vic.gov.au). It's important that you take precautions to avoid risk to your health, and that of your family and neighbours. Building materials should be wetted down to prevent dust. Personal protective equipment (dust mask, gloves and coveralls) should be worn. More information is available from [asbestos.vic.gov.au](https://asbestos.vic.gov.au).

EPA can provide information about the disposal of asbestos as a waste product.

Visit [epa.vic.gov.au](https://epa.vic.gov.au) or call us on 1300 372 842 for more information on where you can take your asbestos waste for disposal. Contact the facility before visiting to make sure it is operating.

If you're visiting a property but not cleaning up, personal protective equipment should be worn to minimise exposure to airborne dust and other hazards from fire-damaged homes.

## How can I have ash or debris on my property tested for asbestos?

If you would like to have a sample of material tested for asbestos, contact the National Association of Testing Authorities (NATA) on (03) 9274 8200.

Council can retain all fees and penalties collected by council under the Act.

At present, council can retain fees and penalties related to OWMS permits, residential noise and litter and other waste.

This change will also allow councils to retain penalties for offences against the regulations relating to OWMS, and penalties associated with powers and functions delegated to councils by EPA.



## Further information and updates

Contact EPA on 1300 372 842 or [epa.vic.gov.au](https://epa.vic.gov.au)

- Incident information and updates: [emergency.vic.gov.au](https://emergency.vic.gov.au)
- Up-to-date air quality information: [epa.vic.gov.au/airwatch](https://epa.vic.gov.au/airwatch)
- Information about the safe disposal of asbestos: [worksafe.vic.gov.au/asbestos](https://worksafe.vic.gov.au/asbestos)
- More about the health risks of asbestos: [asbestos.vic.gov.au](https://asbestos.vic.gov.au)
- Information about the impacts of smoke: [epa.vic.gov.au/smoke](https://epa.vic.gov.au/smoke)
- Emergency information and fact sheets: [epa.vic.gov.au/emergency](https://epa.vic.gov.au/emergency)



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