

After a fire: asbestos hazards



Environment
Protection
Authority Victoria



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Fact sheet

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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.

Due to its strength, heat resistance and insulating properties, asbestos was used widely in industrial and commercial applications from the late 1800s. Uses included asbestos cement (AC) 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. 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.

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 health risks of asbestos is available at asbestos.vic.gov.au

Further information and updates

Contact EPA on
1300 372 842
(1300 EPA VIC)
or epa.vic.gov.au

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



After a fire: asbestos hazards

What happens to asbestos during 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. However, pieces of asbestos material and some fibres may remain in the fire debris and present a risk if they are disturbed while cleaning up after a fire.

Where it is suspected that materials containing asbestos are likely to be present, cleanup should be conducted in line with [WorkSafe requirements](#).

What is the safest way to clear burnt asbestos-containing material from my 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](https://www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/asbestos)) has a list of licensed asbestos removalists or you can search online.

If you do want to clean up your property yourself, make sure that you follow guidelines available for homeowners on [asbestos.vic.gov.au](https://www.asbestos.vic.gov.au). It is 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 and protective personal equipment (dust mask, gloves and coveralls) should be worn. More detailed information is available from [asbestos.vic.gov.au](https://www.asbestos.vic.gov.au).

WorkSafe states that in very limited circumstances at workplaces, some asbestos may be removed without a licence if done so safely and in accordance with the law.

EPA can provide you more information about the disposal of asbestos as a waste product. Visit [epa.vic.gov.au](https://www.epa.vic.gov.au) or call us on 1300 372 842 (1300 EPA VIC) for more information on where you can take your waste asbestos for disposal.

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.

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.

How does EPA monitor for asbestos?

If there is a potential for asbestos to be released into the air during a fire, EPA may organise for specific asbestos monitoring to be done by a specialist, usually nearby to residential areas. We will use this monitoring data to determine if anything further should be done to reduce airborne asbestos fibres.

Incident air monitoring

EPA measures air quality at locations around the state. During an incident where smoke from fire poses a risk to public health, EPA may deploy incident air monitoring equipment to the location. EPA can monitor for a range of pollutants, including particles and other chemicals.

Results from incident air monitoring (excluding asbestos) is available on [EPA AirWatch](#), and updated hourly.