

Information about Asbestos

What is asbestos?

Asbestos is a mineral fibre that occurs naturally in the environment. Asbestos fibres are very strong and are highly resistant to heat, fire, chemicals, and wearing down. Asbestos was mainly imported and used before the 1980s. After the health risks of asbestos became known, other materials were used in its place.



How can asbestos affect health?

Asbestos is a risk to health only when it is inhaled (breathed in) as fine dust.

Everyone is exposed to low levels of asbestos over their life, and the vast majority of people will never have an asbestos related health problem because the levels of asbestos present in the environment are very low.

Most people who have been exposed to higher levels of asbestos for a short time, will never have any asbestos-related health problems. It is more harmful to breathe in a lot of fibres, on many occasions, than a few fibres for only a short time period.

There are a number of diseases that can be related to the deposit and penetration of asbestos fibres:

- asbestosis (scarring of lung tissue)
- mesothelioma (malignant tumours, cancers which develop around the lungs or intestine)
- pleural plaques (thickening of membranes around the lungs)
- lung cancer.

If you have any concerns about your health as a result of asbestos exposure, call your family doctor/GP, or call Healthline 0800 611 116.

What are asbestos-containing materials?

In the past, the special properties of asbestos made it popular to use in a wide range of building materials and other products.

Generally, asbestos-containing materials that are in good condition will not release asbestos fibres and are not a risk to health.

However, constant exposure to crumbly or powdery (friable), damaged, exposed, or poorly maintained asbestos materials may increase the risk of asbestos related health conditions.

The number of fibres that are released from asbestos-containing materials depend on:

- the percentage of asbestos in the material
- the way it is handled, used or worked on
- how tightly the fibres are bound
- the degree of damage or wear.

For more information on the health effects related to asbestos exposure, go to:

www.health.govt.nz/your-health/healthy-living/environmental-health/hazardous-substances/asbestos