

# Are you a tradie?

If so, you could encounter asbestos in your day-to-day work. It's important you know how to protect yourself from the hazards of this once popular building material.

Tradies are at a higher risk of being exposed to asbestos than the general population.

## What is asbestos?

Asbestos is a group of naturally-occurring fibrous minerals found in Australia and around the world.

## How common is asbestos?

Asbestos is commonly found in many buildings and homes built before 1990. Asbestos minerals have an almost unique combination of chemical and physical properties, which at one time made them very popular in the building industry. Until the mid 1980s, Australia had one of the highest rates of asbestos use per person in the world. It was used in over 3,000 products. Asbestos-containing materials were popular because they were cheap to produce, lightweight, versatile and fire-resistant. Because of this, asbestos may be found in many buildings and everyday consumer items.

We now know that asbestos can be dangerous and may put your health at risk if you are working with it. Asbestos was gradually phased out of building materials during the 1980s and manufacturing stopped in 1987. Its use was banned completely in Australia from 1 January 2004.

## Why is asbestos dangerous?

Asbestos can be hazardous to your health. Breathing in asbestos fibres can lead to diseases such as asbestosis, lung cancer and mesothelioma. These diseases can take decades to develop and have no known cure. They can cause debilitating illness and premature death. This is why precautions should be taken to minimise exposure to airborne asbestos fibres.

If you are regularly working with asbestos-containing materials, in some circumstances you are required by

law to undertake regular health monitoring by a medical professional. For further information visit [worksafe.vic.gov.au](http://worksafe.vic.gov.au)

**If you think you have been exposed you can contact your GP for a health check.**

## What are the types of asbestos?

There are two types of asbestos building materials - "**non-friable**" and "**friable**".



**Non-friable** (also known as "**bonded**") asbestos products are chemically bonded to a solid material, such as cement. They are solid and rigid, with the asbestos fibres tightly bound within them and generally less likely to be released into the air. Examples of bonded asbestos are asbestos cement (AC) sheet (fibro) and vinyl asbestos floor tiles.



**Friable** asbestos products are defined as materials that can be crumbled, pulverised or reduced to a powder by hand pressure when dry. Typically, asbestos fibres are more easily released into the air from friable products. Examples of friable asbestos are pipe lagging, penetration packing, electrical switchboard lining and vinyl floor sheeting backing.



## How does this affect me?

Because the use of asbestos was so widespread, and asbestos-containing products are often hidden from view within the building structure, it can affect workers across a broad range of trades.

This includes the more obvious workers, such as bricklayers, builders, carpenters, electricians, joiners, painters, plumbers, roofers and tilers.

It also includes workers who install kitchens, bathrooms, heating and air conditioning systems, insulation, roofs and guttering, solar panelling and external cladding.

Other types of workers may also be at risk of asbestos exposure. These include:

- rubbish removalists, workers at waste disposal facilities and landfill sites, as asbestos can be illegally placed in bins (including skip bins)
- landscapers, who may encounter buried asbestos
- telecommunications technicians, who may encounter asbestos when installing cables or working on bituminous asbestos-containing boards
- mechanics working on old cars or machines, who may encounter asbestos when working on brakes and gaskets.

“Asbestos materials that are painted and sealed and in good condition, pose a low risk.”

## What should I do to be “asbestos aware”?

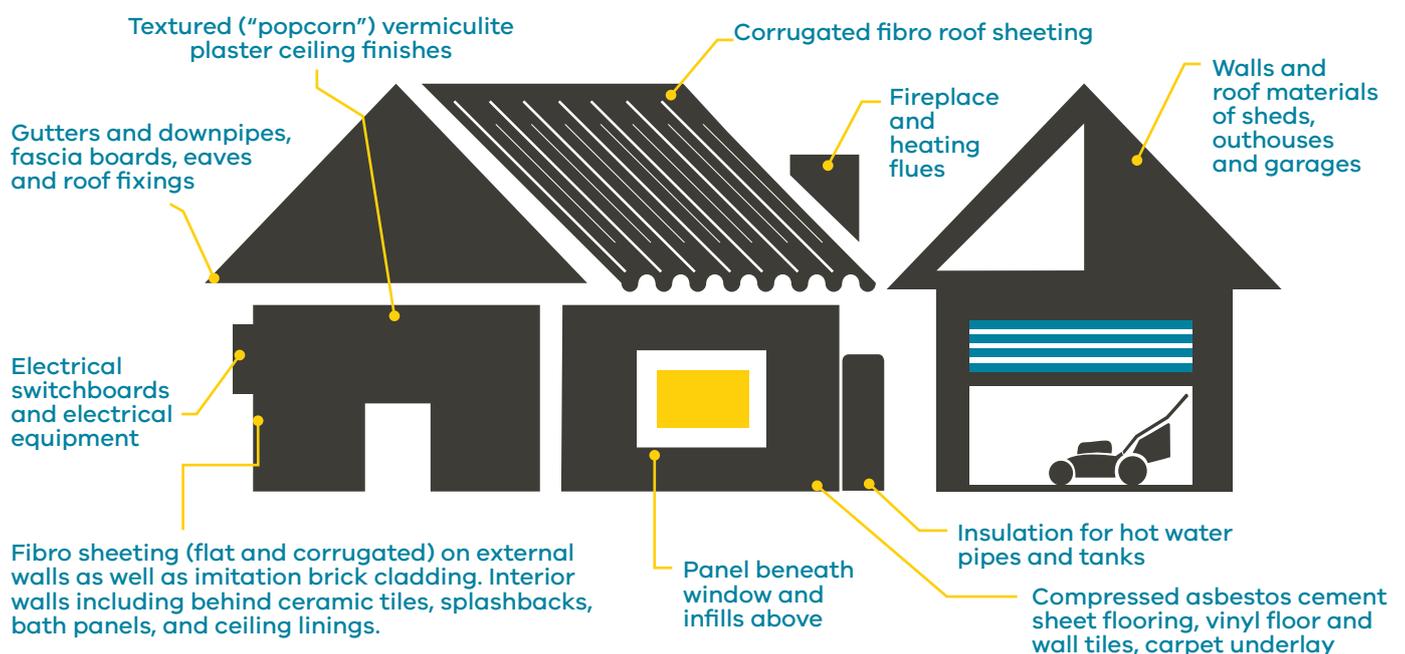
It is recommended that you complete asbestos awareness training before working in locations where asbestos-containing materials may be present. This will inform you of the dangers of asbestos and the precautions you need to take. It will also help you recognise potential asbestos-containing materials and to better understand your rights and responsibilities as a person who may encounter asbestos in their day-to-day work. **Asbestos awareness training** must also incorporate safe handling procedures and control measures to use when working with asbestos materials. Asbestos training providers can be sourced online.

## Where am I likely to find asbestos?

Because of its popularity as a building material, many buildings built in Victoria before 1990 are likely to contain asbestos in some form. The graphic below shows some of the common places it can be found.

Other materials that may contain asbestos include:

- fireproofing materials – structural steel
- thermal insulation – pipe lagging and boiler insulation.
- acoustic insulation – plant rooms and air handling units (AHUs)
- woven materials – window rope, seals and gaskets
- binders/fillers/extenders in products – mastics, expansion joints, window putty and industrial paints
- friction materials – brake pads.



Remnants of asbestos can also be found in soils where old sheds or houses have been demolished in the past



## How can I tell if a product or material may contain asbestos?

You can't tell if a material contains asbestos just by looking at it. Only scientific testing of a sample can confirm this.

The age of the building can give you an indication of whether it is likely to contain asbestos. Buildings constructed before 1990 are highly likely to contain some asbestos materials.

Some building materials might be directly labelled with words such as 'WARNING: CONTAINS ASBESTOS'. However, materials may contain asbestos even if there isn't a label.

Don't be afraid to ask questions if you suspect the presence of asbestos, and if in doubt stop work until it can be confirmed. It isn't worth putting yourself and others at risk.

**If you need help or advice you can call WorkSafe on 1800 136 089**

## What if I'm working in a commercial building?

Before you start work on a building constructed before 2004, you should ask for a copy of the Asbestos Register. These workplaces are required by law to have an Asbestos Register that identifies the location and condition of asbestos within the building, including the suspected presence of asbestos. You have the legal right to access the register.

If you are refurbishing or demolishing a commercial building, then the law also requires you to review the Asbestos Register before you commence to ensure that it properly covers the areas being refurbished or demolished.

If a workplace does not have an Asbestos Register, and the building was constructed prior to 1 January 2004, you have two options:

- Assume the material contains asbestos and use safe working procedures.
- Have a sample of the material taken by a **competent person** prior to undertaking work.  
(see information following as to who can test the material.)

## What if I'm working in a residential building?

If you are working in a house or unit block built before 1990, then be careful. It is highly likely the building will contain some asbestos materials, and the responsibility rests with you to protect yourself and others from them.

Before you start work you should ask the home owner, tenant or managing agent if they are aware of any asbestos in the building.

If they are, then still proceed with caution. If you identify any potential asbestos-containing materials (as learnt through your asbestos awareness training), engage a competent professional to test the materials to confirm whether they contain asbestos.

## Who can do asbestos testing?

The sample must be tested by an asbestos laboratory approved by the National Association of Testing Authorities (NATA). **Competent persons** who can take the sample include professional occupational hygienists, whom you can find via a web search or on the Australian Institute of Occupational Hygienists website [aioh.org.au](http://aioh.org.au) and licensed removalists, whom you can find listed on [worksafe.vic.gov.au](http://worksafe.vic.gov.au).

For more on testing accreditation, you can phone NATA on 1800 621 666 or visit [nata.com.au](http://nata.com.au)

**Follow the golden rule – if you think it might be asbestos, treat it like it is.**

## Can I remove asbestos?

### Only in limited circumstances.

When it's sealed, undisturbed and in good condition, asbestos is very low risk.

When it's broken or disturbed, it can become a hazard, and it will then need to be removed.

If you have completed asbestos awareness training on how to identify, safely handle and suitably contain asbestos, then you may remove small amounts of asbestos as long as:

- there is no more than 10 square metres of non-friable asbestos and
- the removal of asbestos contaminated dust takes no more than 10 minutes, and
- no more than 1 hour of asbestos removal takes place in a 7 day period.

If you are removing limited asbestos you must ensure:

- you have signage and barriers in place to show others that you are removing asbestos
- you use the correct personal protective equipment (PPE)
- you decontaminate yourself and the work area afterwards

- you contain and seal the asbestos waste in a container/bag and clean the outside
- you dispose of the asbestos waste at a landfill licensed by the Environment Protection Authority (EPA) to accept asbestos waste. These can be found on the EPA website at [epa.vic.gov.au](http://epa.vic.gov.au)

It is strongly recommended that you engage licensed asbestos removalists who are trained to remove and dispose of asbestos safely. There are two categories of Asbestos Removal Licence: Class A and Class B.

### Class A Licence

Can remove both friable and non-friable asbestos materials.

### Class B Licence

Can only remove non-friable (bonded) asbestos materials.

You can find a licensed asbestos removalist on the WorkSafe Victoria website at [worksafe.vic.gov.au](http://worksafe.vic.gov.au).

Also review the *WorkSafe Victoria Compliance Code: Removing Asbestos in the Workplace* to ensure you are meeting all legal obligations.



**Visit [asbestos.vic.gov.au](http://asbestos.vic.gov.au) to find out more**



Prepared by the Latrobe Valley Asbestos Taskforce for  
[www.asbestos.vic.gov.au](http://www.asbestos.vic.gov.au)

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