

## ASBESTOS

Asbestos is the name given to a naturally occurring mineral that was mined for its useful properties in insulating and fireproofing. There are three main types: *chrysotile*, or white asbestos; *amosite*, or brown asbestos, and *crocidolite*, or blue asbestos. While chrysotile is the most common type found in buildings (90 – 95%), amosite and crocidolite can also be found, primarily in commercial and industrial buildings. Until the 1970s asbestos was commonly found in most building materials. Today, anything containing asbestos must be labeled and used with extreme caution.

Asbestos particles are made of microscopic bundles of fibers, and are so small and light they have been known to stay airborne in a vacuum-sealed room for up to seventy-two hours. A “safe level” of exposure has not yet been determined, although we know the longer one has been exposed to the material, the higher the risk is. Among the diseases caused by exposure to asbestos are asbestosis, mesothelioma, and lung cancer.

Asbestosis is caused when fibers are inhaled and become trapped in the lung tissue. The body tries to dissolve the fibers by sending an acid to the area. Because of the resistance of the fiber, the acid does little to the asbestos and instead severely scars the lung tissue to the point of impairing lung function. Mesothelioma, often called “Steve McQueen disease,” is the hardening of the lining of the lung (pleura) and chest cavity. Cancer of the lungs or gastrointestinal tract is no less forgiving and can be greatly increased by cigarette smoking (about 50%). The latency period for all of these diseases varies from ten to forty years.

There are numerous places in older homes where you might find asbestos. Insulation on piping, boilers or ducts, floor and ceiling tiles, cement board and pipe, wall-joint compound, “popcorn” ceiling texture, shingles and siding are some of the more common products containing asbestos, particularly if the home was built prior to 1980. Brake and clutch linings, stove-top pads, ironing-board covers and even some hair dryers also commonly contain asbestos.

Although asbestos is a potential carcinogen, it is only a risk if it is “friable,” meaning it can be crushed with hand pressure and the particles can become airborne. If it is in a “non-friable” state, it should be left alone or encapsulated. You cannot tell whether a material contains asbestos by simply looking at it. If you suspect or have any doubts about a particular material, treat it as if it *is* asbestos until a sample can be analyzed by a professional.

Before beginning a remodeling project in an older home you may want to consider testing any suspect materials. This will save you undue risks and problems further along in your project.

For more information, please go to the following website:

<http://www.epa.gov/asbestos>