

Know the rules around asbestos management by contractors

When you engage an individual or business to undertake works at your home, Occupational Health & Safety regulations come into force. There are specific rules around the management of asbestos, as it is an identified hazardous material.

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 have no known cure and can cause debilitating illness and premature death. This is why precautions should be taken to minimise exposure to airborne asbestos fibres.

How common is asbestos?

Asbestos is commonly found in many 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 3000 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.





What happens if asbestos is present on my property?

Any contractor who comes onto your property, whether it is a builder, an electrician, a heating system installer or any other trade, must be mindful of asbestos.

It is the contractor's duty to ensure any asbestos-containing materials are identified before work commences. If asbestos is present, the contractor must put management controls in place.

Types of asbestos

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



Non-friable (also known as "**bonded**") asbestos products are made from a bonding compound (such as cement) mixed with asbestos. 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 non-friable asbestos include asbestos cement (AC) sheeting (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 include insulation around hot water pipes and asbestos rope (known as lagging).

How is asbestos identified?

Only a National Association of Testing Authorities (NATA) accredited laboratory can confirm whether a suspected material has asbestos or not. You cannot tell for certain if something has asbestos or not simply by looking at it. If it is believed to be asbestos, it is safest to assume that it is, and treat it as such.

For more on testing accreditation, you can phone NATA on 1800 621 666 or visit nata.com.au

Can the contractor remove the asbestos?

If the asbestos needs to be removed, the safest course of action is to engage a licensed asbestos removalist. Licensed removalists are professionally trained in dealing with hazardous materials and know how it must be safely managed. In Victoria, these specially trained removalists are licensed by WorkSafe. You can find a licensed removalist in your area by visiting www.asbestos.vic.gov.au

An unlicensed person can only remove asbestos in specific circumstances. This is to minimise the risk of harm presented by deadly asbestos fibres.

A contractor must only perform asbestos removal work if they are trained to perform the work in a manner that does not put others at risk.

A licensed removalist is familiar with the procedures to remove and package the asbestos properly, remediate and decontaminate the area, and transport the asbestos waste safely in a permitted vehicle to a licensed asbestos landfill site for disposal.

What procedures must an unlicensed person follow?

The same procedures apply to both licensed and non-licensed persons, however the rules differ according to the volume and type of asbestos-containing materials.

A non-licensed person can only:

- remove non-friable (bonded) asbestos
- remove up to a maximum of 10m² of asbestos-containing material in any one removal activity
- undertake removal works of up to one hour maximum in any 7-day period.

What are the legal requirements for asbestos removal and disposal on my property by a contractor?

The following gives a summary of the key procedures outlined in the WorkSafe compliance code for asbestos removal in workplaces (your home becomes a workplace when you engage a person to perform work on/at it). Other compliance requirements are set out in the code, which you can access at asbestos.vic.gov.au

Advising adjacent properties

Prior to the removal activity, properties immediately adjacent to yours must be notified that asbestos removal works will take place.

This is so doors and windows can be kept shut, and all members of the household including pets stay indoors (or away) during the works. Additionally, it is not a good idea to have clothes hanging outside on the clothesline.

Barriers and signage

A barrier around the property restricting access is required while the asbestos removal works are taking place. In addition, a sign advising passers-by that asbestos has been identified is also required.



Personal protective equipment (PPE)

Full PPE must be worn by any person working on the site. This includes a P2 (minimum) respirator face mask well as disposable coveralls with hoods, boot/shoe covers, and gloves. All of these wearable items must be disposed of along with the asbestos-containing materials.

[See the PPE fact sheet for further information]

Removal works

As far as reasonably practicable, the person removing the asbestos-containing materials must ensure that airborne asbestos fibres are not released, and that any nearby areas are not contaminated.

The methods used to remove the asbestos are **very important**. These include:

- using hand tools instead of power tools
- careful handling of asbestos-containing materials (*i.e. no throwing it into the back of a truck where it might break and release fibres*)
- using a fine water mist to spray and keep the asbestos-containing materials damp (*definitely not using high-pressure water jet sprayers which can disturb and release fibres and spread them more rapidly into other areas*)
- using a plastic drop sheet to collect any asbestos debris, which will be disposed of along with the asbestos waste.

Decontamination

A decontamination area must be established that is separate from the asbestos removal work area.

Decontamination means doing as much as possible to minimise the spread of fibres.

This is not only for equipment and tools used but also for personal decontamination. It is important that an access route is established so that after leaving the area, the person does not have to re-enter it.

Note that the use of a domestic vacuum cleaner does not meet the regulations. Special Dust Class H vacuum cleaners are available for hire.

Packaging for disposal

A system needs to be in place for the containment and disposal of the asbestos waste.

Asbestos waste includes all asbestos removed as well as all disposable items including plastic sheeting/drop sheets etc and PPE. *i.e. anything used in the course of the removal process.*

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Items must be:

- double-wrapped in heavy duty polythene sheeting (minimum 200 micron thickness) OR in double asbestos waste bags
- sealed with appropriate adhesive tape
- labelled clearly to indicate the contents are hazardous asbestos materials. e.g. "Caution: Asbestos"

and:

- the exterior of the packaged waste must be decontaminated (*wiped down with a damp cloth/ rag that is also put into the bag for disposal*).

Can asbestos waste be taken to the local landfill site?

Not all waste centres and landfills accept asbestos waste. Visit the Environment Protection Authority (EPA) website at epa.vic.gov.au for a list of facilities that are licensed to accept asbestos waste.

A contractor you have engaged must take asbestos waste to a facility that is licensed to receive commercial asbestos waste.

DO NOT place the asbestos waste in any of your domestic bins.

Transporting asbestos waste

There are EPA regulations that apply to the transport of asbestos waste. A contractor you have engaged to remove and dispose of the asbestos, must:

- use EPA's waste tracker tool, and
- have a waste transport permit for their vehicle.

The exception to this is if the asbestos waste is less than 50 litres in total or, if as the homeowner, you are disposing of the asbestos waste yourself (*which is not recommended*). All asbestos waste must be taken to a licensed facility. Find out more about the requirements at epa.vic.gov.au



Using a licensed removalist is the safest way to remove asbestos from your home

ALWAYS...

- ✓ **Pre-plan** your job.
- ✓ **Cover** the work area in plastic drop sheets with a thickness of 200um.
- ✓ **Wear** PPE that is rated for asbestos removal.
- ✓ **Ensure** no electrical products or exposed wiring are in the work area.
- ✓ **Wet** the asbestos material using a gentle spray mix of water and PVA glue.
- ✓ **Minimise** the number of people in the work area.
- ✓ **Decontaminate** yourself, the work area and equipment when the work is completed.

NEVER...

- ✗ **Create** dust.
- ✗ **Break** asbestos material.
- ✗ **Work** in draughty or windy conditions.
- ✗ **Use** brooms, brushes or high-pressure water.
- ✗ **Use** household vacuum cleaners.
- ✗ **Remove** your respirator while still working with asbestos.
- ✗ **Leave** the asbestos work area without decontaminating first.

Visit asbestos.vic.gov.au to find out more

Prepared by the Latrobe Valley Asbestos Taskforce for
www.asbestos.vic.gov.au

This information in this fact sheet has been adopted with permission from the NSW Environment Protection Authority

