



## **FACT SHEET**

# **What is Asbestos?**

### **What is asbestos?**

Asbestos is the general name for a group of rock-forming minerals that consist of extremely strong and durable fibers. The heat resistant and lightweight qualities of asbestos made it very useful in construction and thermal insulation. Between 1900 and 1980, an estimated 30 million tons were installed in commercial, industrial and private buildings.

### **Why is asbestos a problem?**

When disturbed, asbestos crumbles into a dust of microscopic fibers that can remain in the air for a long period of time. If inhaled, they pose a serious health threat as asbestos fibers can become permanently lodged in body tissues.

Symptoms of asbestos-related diseases generally do not appear for 20 years or longer after the first exposure. Long before its effects are detectable, asbestos-related disease will reach the incurable stage. Exposure to asbestos has been shown to cause cancer in the lungs and stomach as well as some cancers of internal organs including the mouth, esophagus, larynx, kidney and colon. It can also cause asbestosis, which is a chronic disease of the lungs with symptoms similar to emphysema.

Since there is no known safe level of exposure, all asbestos exposure should be avoided. This is particularly important when removing asbestos containing insulation.

### **How can I recognize asbestos?**

Since the early 1970's, the use of asbestos has declined significantly as the health risks have become known. However, older homes may include asbestos in a variety of forms including acoustical ceiling tiles, sprayed-on fireproofing or plaster on ceilings, walls and support beams, and thermal insulation on furnaces and duct work. Appliances such as stoves, hair dryers, and slow-cookers also frequently contain asbestos.

The characteristic of asbestos that makes it dangerous is friability. Friability is asbestos' tendency to crumble and release fibers that can be inhaled. Certain building materials contain asbestos with a binding agent, such as floor tiles and roofing shingles, and are not considered friable as long as they are not subject to sanding, grinding, cutting or abrading.

### **What can I do about asbestos in my home?**

Usually, asbestos containing materials are dangerous only if damaged or disturbed. If an acoustic ceiling contains asbestos, for example, do not drill holes in it and be careful not to disturb it while changing light bulbs, etc.

Do not dust, sweep, or vacuum particles suspected of containing asbestos. This will disturb tiny asbestos fibers and may make them airborne. The fibers are so small they cannot be seen and will pass through normal vacuum cleaner filters and reenter the air. Certified asbestos workers use specially-designed vacuum cleaners or a wet mopping procedure to remove asbestos dust.

It is best to leave any suspected asbestos product undisturbed unless the material is crumbling or needs to be repaired or removed. If, however, the material is crumbling or remodeling is planned, then a determination will need to be made if the material is indeed asbestos.

## **Asbestos**

Often, people who work with asbestos containing materials - such as plumbers, contractors, or heating specialists - can make a determination, or the materials may be tested. For the names of testing facilities, consult the local phone directory yellow pages under Laboratories - Analytical.

### **How can I lessen my potential exposure to asbestos?**

The only safe approach is to hire a certified asbestos contractor to evaluate a home. The asbestos contractor can give advice on whether the asbestos should be encapsulated, removed, or left alone. If only minor repairs are needed in a small area, the contractor may seal the damaged sections by spraying with a heat resistant paint or sealant or using wide duct tape.

Only allow certified asbestos contractors to remove asbestos because of the risk of exposure to the microscopic fibers and to keep from making the problem worse. In San Diego County, there are many certified asbestos contractors; most are listed in the yellow pages. Asbestos contractors are required to be registered with the California State Contractor Licensing Board and the California Occupational Safety and Health Administration. They are regulated by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the California Department of Health Services.

### **How is asbestos regulated?**

The District's Rules 361.140 to 361.156 have been implemented to control the emissions of asbestos into the atmosphere. Certain operations are prohibited such as the paving of roads with asbestos tailings, the use of molded insulation materials containing asbestos that are friable (easily crumbled), and the spraying of any substance containing any amount of asbestos. Also prohibited are visible emissions from asbestos mills.

Special procedures must be followed during demolition, renovation, and removal of asbestos containing material. In addition, the District must be notified in writing at least 10 days in advance of any demolition regardless of whether any asbestos is present or not. The District must also be notified in writing at least 10 days in advance of any renovation that exceeds threshold amounts. This notification is to afford the District's inspectors an opportunity to ensure that the correct procedures are being followed. Disposal sites that receive waste from these operations are also subject to this rule.

Failure to meet these requirements will result in the issuance of a Notice of Violation that may result in monetary penalties or, in serious cases, in civil or criminal prosecution. The maximum penalty is \$50,000 or up to one year in jail, or both.

There are additional requirements contained in the District's rules that may apply. To obtain a copy of the asbestos rule or all of the District's Rules and Regulations, call (858) 586-2600 or visit our website at [www.sdapcd.org](http://www.sdapcd.org).

### **What can I do in case of fire?**

Fire will not destroy microscopic asbestos particles. If a home burns down or sustains major fire damage and was constructed before 1978, special precautions should be taken. Sifting through the rubble after a fire may disturb asbestos fibers, and respirators with special asbestos filters should be obtained from a safety supply store for protection during this task.

In addition, dust created by removing rubble from the site may cause neighbors to be exposed to asbestos. Wetting down the rubble before disposal will help to reduce this exposure.

When demolishing a home or building by burning it down, the asbestos demolition and renovation reporting requirements must be followed.

### **What is the Air Pollution Control District?**

The Air Pollution Control District is a government agency that regulates sources of air pollution within San Diego County to protect public health. The District's regulating and enforcement authority comes

## **Asbestos**

from state law and, in certain cases, federal law. The District's regulations cover the control of emissions from such things as open burning, incineration, gasoline, paint and other evaporative compounds.

### **Who can I call for more information?**

This fact sheet provides answers to commonly asked questions about asbestos. For more specific questions about asbestos removal, demolition or renovation, contact the District's Compliance Division at (858) 586-2650.