

Asbestos: What You Need to Know

Asbestos is a natural mineral made up of fibers. Because it is extremely heat-resistant and durable, asbestos was often used in fireproofing products, insulation, roofing materials, floor and ceiling tiles, and car brakes and clutches. While asbestos is not used much today, it is often present in older products. Long-term exposure to asbestos fibers can lead to serious diseases such as lung cancer, digestive tract cancer, mesothelioma (a cancer in the lining of the lungs, heart or abdomen), or asbestosis (lung scarring).



Who is at risk of an asbestos-related disease?

While everyone may have some level of exposure to asbestos, you are at increased risk for asbestos-related diseases if you have been exposed to asbestos on a regular basis over many years, usually through work. Construction, insulation and shipyard workers who have installed, disturbed or removed asbestos without proper protection are at increased risk. If you are exposed to asbestos over a long period of time AND you are a smoker, you are much more likely to develop some asbestos-related diseases. In general, the greater the exposure to asbestos, the greater the chance of developing harmful health effects.

How does exposure to asbestos occur?

Asbestos, when intact, does not pose a risk to health. However, when asbestos-containing materials (ACMs) are damaged or disturbed, asbestos fibers can be released into the air and breathed in.

Can I find out if I've been exposed to asbestos?

There are no routine medical tests for asbestos exposure. Chest X-rays and lung function tests can show lung damage once it has formed. Asbestos-related diseases may not develop until 10 to 40 years after exposure. Asbestos exposure does not usually cause immediate health conditions, such as difficulty in breathing or skin problems.

How do I know if there is asbestos in my home?

The use of asbestos has greatly decreased since the 1970s, but it is still present in many older products and materials. A licensed environmental inspector can test materials and air for asbestos. Testing may be useful in identifying potential exposures and evaluating the effectiveness of proper asbestos removal and cleanup. Remember, however, that **undamaged** asbestos-containing materials (ACMs) do not present a risk and can be left in place.

More Resources

- **Building owners** must follow federal rules on the proper care of asbestos materials.
- **Schools** are required to identify and safely handle asbestos materials.
- **Employers** are required to protect workers from asbestos exposure by following the U.S. Occupational Safety and Health Administration regulations. In New York State, the Public Employee Safety and Health Bureau requires the same protection for city, county and state workers.

To report a problem or for more information, call **311** or visit [nyc.gov/health](https://www.nyc.gov/health) and search **asbestos**.