

Management of Asbestos During Emergencies

Asbestos is a naturally occurring fibrous material found in rock formations. It is strong, resistant to heat and most chemicals and therefore was widely used as a building material in the past. Buildings constructed before 1980 are likely to contain asbestos in some of the building materials, and when these materials are disturbed, there is a higher chance of asbestos being released into the air. The diagram below shows items in the home that may contain asbestos:

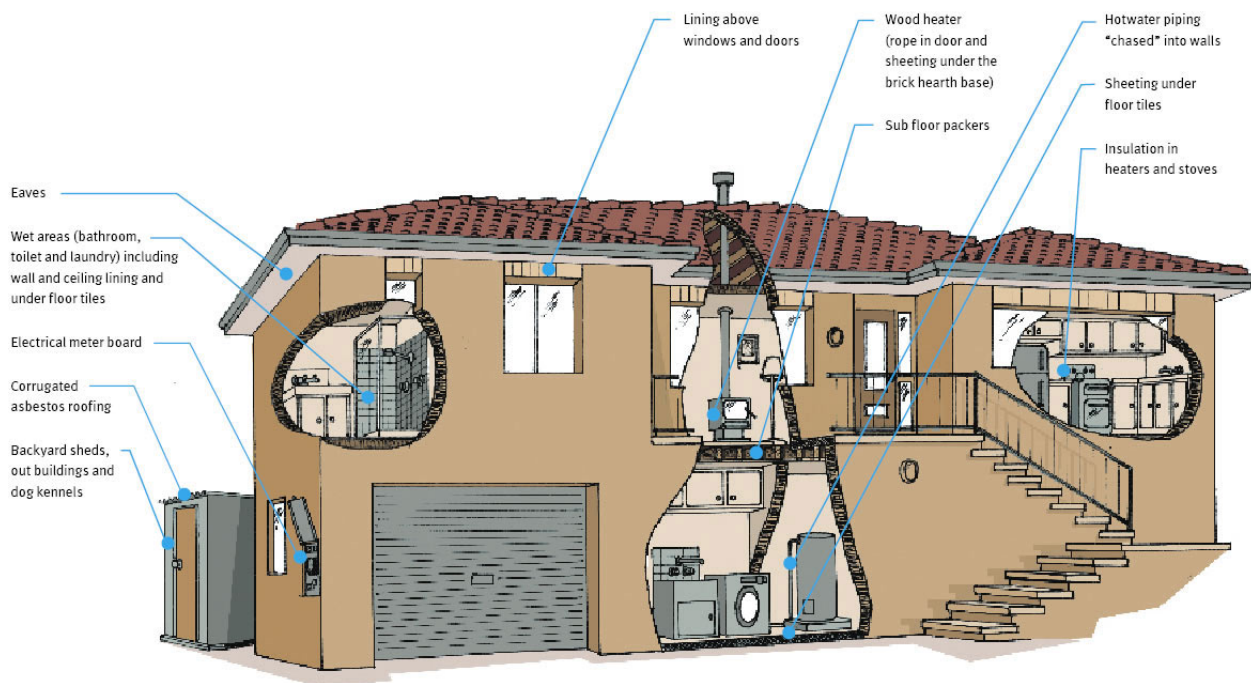


Image source: Queensland Government, Department of Justice and Attorney-General

Asbestos can cause health problems when it is inhaled. There is no significant health risk if asbestos containing materials like roofing shingles, ceiling and floor tiles and insulation remain intact; however once they are disturbed or damaged asbestos can be released into the air resulting in potential health problems. While there are no immediate health effects, prolonged exposure may cause the following illness:

- Mesothelioma: a rare cancer of the tissues that line the lungs and/or abdomen
- Asbestosis: scarring of the lung tissues, which makes breathing difficult
- Lung cancer

Symptoms may start to appear long after the asbestos exposure took place, sometimes several decades later depending on the individuals' health and level of exposure. The longer someone is exposed, the higher the risk of developing illness.

In cases of disaster such as fires, earthquakes, tornadoes, floods and other severe weather events buildings containing asbestos may become damaged or destroyed. You can minimize the risk of exposure to asbestos after a disaster by being aware of the following recommendations:

- A qualified professional's assessment is strongly recommended before entering any buildings to make sure it is safe.
- Wear long sleeve shirts and long pants and any appropriate protective equipment to prevent inhalation
- It is recommended to wear National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) approved N-100 P-100, and R-100 respirators
- **PLEASE NOTE: N95 respirators DO NOT PROVIDE ADEQUATE PROTECTION against asbestos exposure**
- Keep people and pets away from the affected area, and seal off the area
- To reduce dust exposure, wet down the area or clean with a wet mop
- Do not break up asbestos containing material during cleanup or disposal
- Wash or dispose of clothing that has been exposed to asbestos
- Avoid vacuuming; however if you must ensure you use a HEPA filter equipped vacuum
- Remove and dispose of all asbestos containing materials in accordance with local waste disposal bylaws

If you have been exposed to asbestos:

- Take a shower and wash exposed areas of the body
- Asbestos related illnesses usually develop with prolonged exposure to asbestos, therefore it is unlikely that you will experience immediate symptoms
- See your health care provider if you are concerned about your medical condition

References:

Ministry of Labour: <http://www.labour.gov.on.ca/english/>

Government of Canada: <https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/air-quality/indoor-air-contaminants/health-risks-asbestos.html>

Environmental Protection Agency: <http://www2.epa.gov/asbestos>



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