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# Avoiding Asbestos in Your Home



By [Gemma Alexander](#)

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[building materials](#), [Red List](#)



Home is supposed to be a safe haven, but if your home is built with dangerous and toxic materials, it could be a threat to your health. Does your home contain asbestos? It very likely may. Asbestos is one of the materials on the [Red List](#), a list of “worst in class” materials, chemicals, and elements that green builders try to avoid.

While it is not possible to completely eliminate everything on the Red List from home construction at this time, the list, updated annually by the [International Living Future Institute](#), provides a target for improvement. Asbestos is one of the Red

## What Do You Think?



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- No
- Yes

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List items that consumer safety advocates have fought against for decades. Despite well-documented hazards, asbestos is not only found in older homes; many construction materials on the market today contain asbestos.

## Asbestos

Asbestos is an inexpensive, naturally occurring mineral comprising [microscopic fibers](#) that are durable, flexible, lightweight, and resistant to fire, electrical, and chemical damage. They are also sound-absorbent and have a high tensile strength. Because of these characteristics, asbestos has been used in literally thousands of products. It was especially popular from the 1930s to the 1970s, when it was used in products from toasters to beauty supplies, car parts to building materials.

Unfortunately, when those tiny fibers of asbestos are disturbed, they can easily be inhaled and become lodged in the lungs. Asbestos is proven to [cause three types of disease](#): lung cancer; mesothelioma, an incurable cancer of the respiratory lining; and a lung disease called asbestosis. There is no safe exposure level for asbestos.



When disturbed, the tiny asbestos fibers are easily inhaled and become lodged in the lungs.

## Got Asbestos?

You can assume any home built before 1980 contains some asbestos. Asbestos was so common in the past that it could be in [almost any part](#) of the house. Common places to find asbestos include high-heat areas in older homes, such as boiler ducts; insulation; vinyl floor tiles; ceiling tiles; and infamously, [popcorn ceilings](#). Roofing materials, cement, siding, and paint can also contain asbestos.

Because asbestos fibers are microscopic it is impossible to tell, simply by looking, whether a material contains asbestos. Taking samples of a material for testing can release fibers into the air.

If you suspect a material in good condition contains asbestos (based upon its age), it's best to assume that it does.

If you suspect that damaged materials, like disintegrating insulation or crumbling drywall, contain asbestos, or if you are planning a remodeling project that could affect suspect materials, consider having a [trained and accredited asbestos professional](#) inspect your home.

## Asbestos Abatement

Although it's counterintuitive, usually the [safest thing to do](#) with asbestos-containing building materials is leave them in place. Asbestos is harmless while it's undisturbed. But any damage to the material, from sawing, sanding, drilling, or even from abrasive cleaning can release the tiny fibers and create a hazard. To avoid damaging asbestos-containing products, you may cover or seal the product. Covering the product could involve wrapping insulated pipes or laying a new layer of flooring over top of vinyl tiles. Some types of insulation can be sealed with a surface treatment that binds the fibers in place.

Asbestos-containing products that are already damaged, or that will be damaged by planned remodeling (for example, removing a wall that contains asbestos insulation) must be removed. Asbestos sealing and removal should only be performed by [accredited professionals](#) – this is not an appropriate DIY project.

Asbestos should be disposed of as [hazardous waste](#).

## Avoiding Asbestos

More than 40 countries around the world have banned asbestos. While there have been [attempts to ban](#) it in the United States, to date, there is no full ban on asbestos. Today, products can contain up to 1% asbestos. One percent sounds like a small amount, but there is no safe exposure limit for asbestos. Although the use of asbestos is decreasing, [many products](#) still contain it. Most common in building products, asbestos is also found in some car parts and vermiculite (used in potting soil and insulation). Warning labels are [generally not required](#), making it very difficult to avoid purchasing products that contain asbestos.

Asbestos-Containing Materials in the Home		
• Adhesives	• Caulk	• Ceiling tiles
• Cement	• Fireplace ashes and embers	• Furnaces
• Generators	• Furnaces	• Insulation
• Paint	• Plaster	• Roof shingles

• Sheetrock • Siding • Vinyl floor tiles

Materials containing asbestos may be found throughout the home. Image:

[Mesothelioma Asbestos Awareness Center](#)

The most significant sources of asbestos in new construction are probably insulation, roofing, and vinyl tiles. Sustainable types of [insulation](#) generally do not include asbestos, and the same is true for more [sustainable roofing](#) materials. Using linoleum or other [eco-friendlier flooring](#) materials instead of vinyl tile will not only avoid asbestos, but other Red List materials (like vinyl).

For larger remodeling projects or new construction, you should talk to your contractor to make it clear that you want to avoid products that contain asbestos. If the contractor seems unfamiliar with which products contain asbestos or is dismissive of your concerns, look for a [new contractor](#) who is better informed about green building.

## Future of Asbestos

In December 2020, EPA issued a [final risk evaluation](#) for chrysotile asbestos that concluded there are unreasonable risks at all stages of a product's lifecycle. Their next step is to propose and finalize actions to protect against the unreasonable risks. In the future, consumers may have one less type of asbestos to worry about.

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By [Gemma Alexander](#)

Gemma Alexander has an M.S. in urban horticulture and a backyard filled with native plants. After working in a genetics laboratory and at a landfill, she now writes about the environment, the arts and family. See more of her writing [here](#).

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