

Managing Asbestos Risks during Bushfire Recovery – Information Sheet

Assess Control Assure acknowledges the challenges Australians have faced as a result of bushfires over the past few months, and we extend our deepest sympathies to everyone impacted. With many people returning to effected communities to assess damage and many important priorities taking shape, the risk asbestos poses to health may be easily overlooked. We therefore offer this complimentary guidance on how to reduce potential health risks associated with fire-damaged asbestos.

Assess Assure Control are also offering a limited number of free 'asbestos in bushfires' information sessions along with respiratory and personal protective safety kits to communities that need it which will help to keep you safer around asbestos over the coming weeks and months.

Understanding asbestos health risks.

Asbestos is a naturally occurring mineral that was mined for use in various building products during the 20th Century.

It is widely known that exposure to airborne asbestos fibres can be hazardous to human health. Asbestos is a known carcinogen as airborne asbestos fibres can become trapped in a person's lungs where they do not breakdown and are unable to be expelled by the body. Breathing in asbestos fibres can lead to a number of diseases, including pleural plaques, asbestosis, lung cancer and mesothelioma.

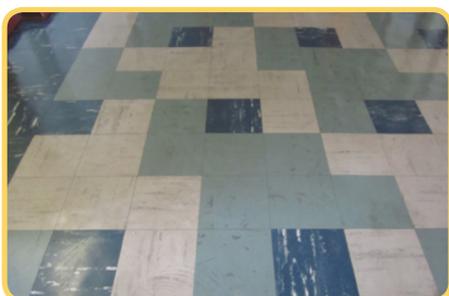
Fire-damaged asbestos products have a greater potential to release airborne asbestos fibres resulting in respirable exposure, as the materials bonding asbestos fibres either burn away or as materials break into smaller pieces and spread contamination over a wider area. Contaminated dust can also cling to clothing and footwear resulting in contamination of other areas such as vehicles and temporary accommodation.

How to assess the likelihood of asbestos on your property.

The peak period of asbestos use in Australian buildings occurred between the 1950s to the 1970s, with asbestos use gradually phased out in certain products from the late 1970s through to the late 1980s. One in three Australian homes that were built before 1990 are believed to contain asbestos. Common examples of asbestos products found in homes, sheds and other out-buildings include:

Fibro cement products:

- External walls (flat sheets, cladding);
- Eave linings;
- Corrugated cement roofs;
- Flues to hot water services or heaters;
- Internal bathroom or shower walls;
- Splashback or wet area tile linings;
- Switchboard backing panels;



Additional examples of asbestos in the home can be found here. <http://asbestosawareness.com.au/gallery-videos/gallery/hazards-in-the-home/#houses-with-asbestos>

Step 1. Assessing the risk of asbestos in your property.

Before accessing a fire-damaged property, consider the following:

Is it safe to return to your property?

Emergency services will advise you if it is safe to re-enter your property.

Was Your Home Built prior to 1990?

If so, there is a higher probability that your building contained asbestos.

Was your home built between 1990 and 2003?

It is less likely, but not impossible, that your building contained some asbestos.

If any buildings constructed on your property were built during the period when asbestos was widely used or if any of the listed products or photos are familiar, you may have asbestos on your property and safety precautions must be taken (refer below).

If you remain unsure whether you have asbestos on your property, safety precautions must be taken until the risk can be ruled out through confirmation on site (refer below).

Step 2: How to safely access your property

Given that exposure to asbestos can be hazardous to your health, it is important that you ensure your safety and the safety of others when re-entering your property where asbestos is present, or the potential is unknown. This includes wearing personal protective equipment (PPE) which includes the following:

- P2 Rated dust mask as a minimum (doctor masks or generic dust mask won't provide the adequate protection levels);
- Type 5/6 disposable coveralls;
- Disposable plastic gloves; and
- Footwear protection such as disposable boot protectors.

When putting on this PPE it is important that you remove your clothing before putting on the disposable suit and store your clothing in an area where it will not get contaminated. You should also ensure that the P2 mask is being worn correctly to ensure maximum protection.



Step 3: How to safely sample suspect materials.

Where confirmation is required to identify the presence/absence of asbestos in a fire-damaged property, the sampling should be conducted in a manner that is safe. WorkSafe Victoria's **Compliance Code for Managing Asbestos in Workplaces** (Appendix C) details a safe procedure for sampling asbestos.

If you wish to have samples analysed for asbestos, this must be done at a **NATA accredited facility**.

If you are uncomfortable sampling, or unsure what to look for, call in a professional. Note that fire damage can make asbestos difficult to identify.

Step 4: What you should do if waste/debris is found to contains asbestos.

Any asbestos identified on your property must be cleaned up, removed and disposed of as asbestos waste. It is always recommended that asbestos is removed by a licensed asbestos removal contractor, in this case, a Class-A licensed contractor. Class-A removalist's can be found on the WorkSafe website at ([Worksafe Victoria LARCs](#)).

It is also advised that air monitoring and a clearance inspection be conducted on the site by an Asbestos Hygienist to ensure the area is safe to re-occupy by unprotected personnel. Clearance inspection are a workplace requirement when the amount of asbestos being removed is over 10sqm of non-friable, or any amount of friable.

What not to do:

- Do not enter your property before it has been advised by emergency services;
- Do not allow unprotected access to the property by anyone assisting you with clean-up and recovery activities;
- Do not dispose of asbestos in wheelie bins;
- Do not illegally dispose of asbestos in the bush/general landfill;
- Do not attempt to clean-up your own property without seeking professional advice;

Need more information?

If you need additional help or guidance you can either: Call us on (03) 9416 0774 or consult one of the following

Useful websites:

www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/asbestos
www.asbestossafety.gov.au/
www.asbestos.vic.gov.au
<https://ref.epa.vic.gov.au/your-environment/waste/asbestos>
<https://gards.org/>
www.acaas.com.au