

ASBESTOS - FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

What is the risk of getting lung cancer from asbestos exposure?

Asbestos fibres are present everywhere in the air at very low levels. This means that everyone is breathing in a very low level of fibres all the time. The exposures encountered by members of the general public outdoors or in their homes are very low and unlikely to present any risk. However, it is wise to take precautions if you are handling any substance you suspect may contain asbestos.

I have an asbestos water tank and am worried that I might get lung cancer from drinking water containing asbestos fibres.

There is no convincing evidence that ingestion of asbestos fibres is associated with any risk to health.

I am fairly sure that I have white asbestos in my home. How do I know whether it might contain more harmful kinds of asbestos like crocidolite (blue) or amosite (brown) asbestos?

This is a job for an expert. The material needs to be analysed by a specialist laboratory. As a rule, white asbestos was used for most materials where some consumer contact was expected. Some amosite was used in buildings, particularly those constructed in the 1950's.

You can find local asbestos laboratories by looking in Yellow Pages or on the internet. They may be able to come to your home and arrange to take the sample for you as well.

Additional information is also available from the HSE on the possible locations of [asbestos in the home](#).

Are old asbestos products more dangerous?

Not necessarily. In some cases, for example, asbestos cement, the product containing fibres may deteriorate with age, making fibre release more likely. It is important that the material binding the asbestos fibres is in good condition.

Should all asbestos containing materials be removed from buildings?

It is recommended that if it is undamaged, and unlikely to be disturbed, e.g. during building work, drilling, etc. material containing asbestos should be left in place, if necessary sealing it.

How can I seal the surface of my asbestos cement sheets?

There are a number of methods available but do not scrape or sand the surface before treating it, e.g.

- Prime the asbestos cement sheets with an alkali-resistant primer then finish with emulsion or gloss paint;
- Cover with wallpaper fixed with a strong adhesive or with hardboard;
- Seal and paint with a bitumastic paint;
- Seal with a PVA adhesive.

I have an asbestos cement garage roof. What should I do when removing or repairing it?

As this is outdoors, there is unlikely to be a risk of serious exposure to asbestos fibres. If you decide to dismantle your garage roof, there is more detailed guidance provided by the Health and Safety Executive in [working with asbestos cement](#). Whilst this guidance is principally aimed at builders, it provides useful information on the precautions you should be taking.

Principal precautions include:

- Keeping the surface of the sheets damp with sprayed water to reduce dust;
- Try to remove the sheets whole and take care to avoid breakage;
- Try to avoid sliding dry sheets over one another, as this could release fibres;
- Avoid the use of power tools;
- Avoid any action that might break up the asbestos, e.g. do not scrape or brush off lichen or moss;
- Asbestos cement roofs can be fragile so take special care to make sure you do not fall through the roof;
- Wear a disposable dust mask suitable for work with asbestos (Certified to EN149 or EN405 Protection Factor FFP3) - available from good DIY outlets;
- Bag or wrap the asbestos sheets in polythene sheets after removal. Seal the bags, e.g. with duct tape – label the bags with ‘ASBESTOS’ and take the sheets to a disposal site licensed to take asbestos waste.
- Clean up all dust with a damp cloth and seal in a bag whilst damp (do not dry sweep). Never use a domestic vacuum cleaner for cleaning up (wet or dry) as any loose fibres can get into the filters.

Where can I dispose of my asbestos cement waste.

Do not take asbestos of any description to Essex County Council Recycling Centres because it will not be accepted. The recycling centres are licensed by the Environment Agency to only accept household waste.

The following options are available:

1. Use a licensed asbestos removal contractor to remove and dispose of the asbestos cement (see Asbestos Removal in the Yellow Pages or contact the Health and Safety Executive on 01245 706 200). Ask for proof of licence if you have any concerns about the competence of the contractor.
2. If you dismantle the item yourself you can use a reputable waste contractor/skip company to dispose of it. Contact the Waste and Recycling Helpline on 0845 603 7625 for details of the Household Hazardous Waste Scheme and to arrange a collection of bonded asbestos for a charge. Further details are available on the [Essex County Council](#) website.
3. You can request for small amounts (up to 40kg) of bonded asbestos products to be collected from your house and safely disposed of free of charge once in any Council Tax year. For example, one small asbestos water tank or one 2.4 x 1.2m (8 x 4ft) sheet would be collected free of charge.
4. Larger amounts can be collected by the Council's Household Hazardous Waste Contractor at the same time but there will be a charge, which must be paid prior to collection.
5. Take it to a licensed site, ensuring that the asbestos is wetted and bagged/wrapped. Details of licensed sites can be obtained from the Environment Agency* on 08708 506 506. This will usually be the cheapest option for amounts over 40kg. Call the site first, do not just turn up.

*Please note: the Environment Agency licenses waste disposal sites but does not collect waste, identify asbestos or give out advice beyond the general information contained above.

My ceiling has a decorative coating (e.g. Artex used to contain white asbestos). How should I remove it?

If possible, you should paint, cover or plaster over the decorative coating rather than remove it. There are products available on the market for covering textured surfaces. Alternatively, if the coating is applied to a plasterboard surface, the whole board may be removed in pieces large enough for convenient handling and disposal.

If you do wish to remove the surface finish only, soak the surface with warm water beforehand and scrape off wet, to reduce the dust generated. Do not sand the decorative coating or scrape off dry. For best protection, wear a disposable dust mask suitable for work with asbestos (Certified to EN149 or EN405 Protection Factor FFP3) - available from good DIY outlets.

The paint on my asbestos soffit boards is flaking badly. What is the best way to renovate or redecorate them?

Avoid working directly overhead. The existing paintwork may be removed by carefully applying a proprietary paint remover to the surface or by spraying with water and gently scraping off loose material. A sealant and finishing coat should then be applied. If sanding is absolutely unavoidable, then a coarse wet and dry paper USED WET will restore a finish. Wear a disposable dust mask suitable for work with asbestos (Certified to EN149 or EN405 Protection Factor FFP3) - available from good DIY outlets.

I have asbestos cement gutters that I want to remove. How should I do this?

Follow the same basic procedure as you would for the removal of asbestos cement roofing. Sections of guttering should be removed in one piece wherever possible, making sure that you keep any dusty material damped down with water.

I have a water tank made from asbestos cement – is it safe?

There is no evidence that exposure to asbestos in drinking water has any adverse effect on health at all, even if the fibres are being released into the water. The outer surface of the tank is usually in a relatively inaccessible place and so should remain in good condition. If regular access around the tank is needed, then sealing the surface may be a sensible precaution.

If you do decide to remove the tank, the [HSE website](#) has some useful advice on going about this. Whilst this guidance is principally aimed at builders, it provides useful information on the precautions you should be taking.

General advice on maintenance on asbestos cement products from HSE website:

These are all principally aimed at builders, but provide good safety advice on working with asbestos cement including.

Cleaning debris from guttering on an asbestos cement roof

Removing asbestos cement debris

Cleaning weathered asbestos cement roofing and cladding

Repairing damaged asbestos cement

Removing asbestos cement sheets, gutters, etc and dismantling a small asbestos cement structure

Removing asbestos cement or reinforced plastic product, e.g. tank, duct, water cistern

Painting asbestos cement sheets

Replacing an asbestos cement flue or duct

Removing an asbestos cement panel outside, beside or beneath a window

Other information sheets are available covering work with textured coatings and a whole range of other DIY type jobs.

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