

Handling of flood damaged asbestos containing building materials

This information is for home owners and volunteers who are involved with the clean up and recovery of buildings damaged by the recent floods.

Background

Asbestos was widely used in fibre cement building materials (for example 'fibro' sheeting and water pipes) manufactured until the mid-1980s. If a weatherboard house was constructed or 'fibro' was installed after 1985, the sheeting would not contain asbestos.

Risk

Asbestos cement products in buildings do not contribute significantly to indoor or outdoor fibre levels if the asbestos cement products are in good order and left undisturbed.

Even weathered asbestos cement products do not release significant amounts of airborne fibres unless the material is significantly disturbed. The risk of inhaling airborne asbestos fibres under these circumstances is very low as the asbestos fibre concentration decreases rapidly as you get further away from the source of the disturbance.

Low level exposure to asbestos fibres is unlikely to result in the development of an asbestos-related disease, as fibre concentrations are likely to be insufficient to increase cumulative lifetime exposure.

The mere presence of asbestos does not constitute a public health risk if people are not exposed to airborne fibres.

Removal and cleaning of flood damaged asbestos containing material (ACM)

General household debris such as kitchen bench tops, chests, wardrobes, shelves and cabinets are unlikely to contain asbestos and therefore should be disposed of without any concern with general rubbish.

Removal of wet ACM debris

Buildings with considerable flood damage may contain debris with ACM. Where possible, the material should be placed in thick plastic bag, and then this bag placed in another bag (double bagging). Large ACM building materials can be covered up using large plastic sheeting. Items that cannot be bagged or covered up should be kept wet. Such debris should be separated from other general flood damaged debris and placed on the kerb side or inside the premises to be disposed of later. Contact your local council for more information on disposal of asbestos debris.

Cleaning of wet ACM

Caution must be exercised when cleaning ACM surfaces. Care must be taken not to damage, abrade or scrape the surface during cleaning.

Cleaning of ACM surfaces may be carried out using general water hoses or cleaned by hand. Painted ACM surfaces in good condition such as walls are less susceptible to asbestos fibre release and can be cleaned with a slightly higher water pressure. The surface should be checked during the cleaning process to ensure the ACM surface is not being damaged.

ACM roofs must not be cleaned using high pressure water cleaners or water blasters. Use of this equipment for this purpose is prohibited as it risks damaging the surface which may cause the release of asbestos fibres.

Removal and/or cleaning of dry ACM

To minimise any potential health risks from handling of dry ACM debris you should take the following additional precautions:

- ensure the site is kept damp at all times while removing the debris
- wear a half-face respirator fitted with a class P1 or P2 filter or disposable respirator. This should be available from your local hardware store.
- wear disposable coveralls, enclosed footwear, gloves and a hat
- not shake dusty clothes
- allow access only for those wearing appropriate personal protective equipment.

Major building works on ACM

Where there is extensive demolition, repair and renovation work involving ACM, licensed asbestos contractors should be employed to undertake the work. Details of licensed contractors may be obtained by contacting Workplace Health and Safety Queensland on 1300 369 915.

Precautions for other asbestos waste

Friable asbestos was used as thermal lagging on pipes and other structures in industrial premises. If it has been disturbed, or work is required on the structure, more stringent precautions must be taken. In these circumstances, it is recommended the area be barricaded until a licensed asbestos removal contractor can undertake the work.

More information

Visit www.deir.qld.gov.au/workplace/resources and read *Asbestos: a home renovator's and tradesperson's guide for minor work in domestic premises*.

Contractors and other workers should comply with the requirements of workplace health and safety legislation on www.deir.qld.gov.au/workplace/law/legislation/index.htm.