

Asbestos – a guide for householders and the general public: Frequently Asked Questions

Why has a new version of *Asbestos – a guide for householders and the general public (the Guide)* been released?

enHealth received considerable feedback from a variety of stakeholder groups after the publication of the May 2012 Guide. The Guide was revised in late 2012 – early 2013. As a result of this revision process, the way some of the key messages and content is presented in the Guide has changed.

Why did the Environmental Health Standing Committee (enHealth) create the Guide?

The Guide was developed in response to the high volume of individual householder enquiries received by state and territory environmental health units in relation to asbestos identification and management. The Guide also combines the practical guidance documents produced by state and territory governments to create a national source of information.

How was the publication developed?

enHealth, a standing committee of the Australian Health Protection Principal Committee (AHPPC), in consultation with technical experts, developed the Asbestos Householders Guide over a period of 34 months. The Guide is based on the enHealth technical monograph "[Management of asbestos in a non-occupational environment](#)" published in 2005.

Was there a consultation process during the development of this publication?

Yes. Each state and territory conducted its own consultation process with stakeholders, including local governments and community organisations. There was also consultation with the Australian Council of Trade Unions. The consultation process was thorough, though specific arrangements varied between jurisdictions. enHealth received considerable feedback during this process and suggestions were incorporated when scientifically accurate.

Will the publication be reviewed?

enHealth reviews all technical documents regularly to ensure they are accurate and representative of the available scientific evidence.

Does the Guide encourage people to undertake home renovations of asbestos themselves? Isn't this dangerous?

The Guide strongly recommends the engagement of professionals in preference to DIY renovations. However, it acknowledges the fact that some individuals may still choose to undertake their own renovations, and therefore provides practical, risk minimisation advice. The Guide was developed as a risk management publication. It is a balance between the precautionary principle and practical public health. It does not encourage individuals to undertake their own renovations but highlights activities that will increase asbestos-related risks, such as using power tools on asbestos products, and provides information on how to reduce asbestos exposure during renovations. The Guide also provides contact information to assist householders in identifying licensed professionals in their own area.

Is the advice in the Guide inconsistent with information from other organisations, like the World Health Organization?

The World Health Organization (WHO) notes that asbestos is a known carcinogenic and there is no safe level of exposure. The WHO provides general information about the management of asbestos in the built environment, and focuses mainly on government and commercial buildings. This information is intended to assist countries in developing local asbestos management programs that address their specific needs. The WHO states that the removal of asbestos can pose a health risk and encourages the engagement of licensed professionals and the use of appropriate personal protective equipment.

The Guide acknowledges that there is no absolutely safe level of exposure to asbestos fibres, and provides safety precautions for handling asbestos products in a residential environment that are designed to reduce risks to a low level; and encourages the engagement of licensed professionals to undertake removal.

Is the advice in the Guide consistent with the recommendations of the Asbestos Management Review?

The Asbestos Management Review Report (the Report) was released on 16 August 2012, and can be found at <http://www.deewr.gov.au/WorkplaceRelations/Policies/AMR/Pages/default.aspx>.

The Report also recommends action be taken to improve awareness of asbestos in homes. The Guide provides practical advice to support this objective. This advice remains necessary as a program for removal from homes is a long-term objective.

Why doesn't the Guide promote prioritised removal of all asbestos? Isn't all asbestos dangerous for health?

The purpose of this Guide is to respond to the high volume of individual household enquiries received on how to safely perform household renovations. enHealth does not encourage individuals to undertake their own renovations, but notes where individuals choose to do so, risk minimisation advice contained in the Guide will reduce the risks.

Is there a safe level of exposure to asbestos products?

The Guide emphasises that there is no absolutely safe level of exposure to asbestos fibres. The Guide provides information to assist householders in reducing their risk of exposure and outlines activities that are likely to be high risk. The safest way to remove asbestos during renovations is to engage a licensed professional.

Can I undertake a single or small number of home renovations without putting myself at risk?

The Guide provides recommendations to assist you in determining what levels of exposure are associated with home renovation activities, and in reducing your level of risk of exposure to asbestos fibres. There is no absolutely safe level of exposure to asbestos; however occasional exposure to small amounts of asbestos is less likely to be dangerous.

If I come into contact with an asbestos product, will I get mesothelioma or any other asbestos-related disease?

Asbestos fibres pose a risk to your health when they are airborne and breathed in. During home renovations, it is quite likely that asbestos fibres will be released into the air. The risk of developing an asbestos-related disease increases in proportion to the number of asbestos fibres a person breathes in during their life. Most people who develop asbestos-related diseases have worked on jobs where they have frequently breathed in large amounts of asbestos fibres.

A very small number of asbestos-related disease cases occur each year in people who have not worked with asbestos products. The low number of cases makes it difficult to determine the exact cause of the disease, but unsafe handling of asbestos materials in the home may have contributed to some of these cases.

The Guide provides information on how to reduce airborne fibres during renovations and the correct use of personal protective equipment to prevent inhalation.

If you are concerned about the health-risks posed by the removal of asbestos products, you should engage a licensed professional.

The Guide doesn't tell me the cost of engaging a licensed professional to remove the asbestos. How can I find that out?

Neither the Australian Government nor state and territory governments regulate the costs associated with the removal of asbestos by private organisations. The Guide provides references to assist you in identifying licensed professionals near you.