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## **What's the Big Deal About Asbestos?**

Bob Aaron, a Toronto real estate lawyer, recently wrote an article for the Toronto Star concerning a transaction that fell through when a home inspection revealed asbestos in the house. What's the big deal about asbestos? The following information taken from the CMHC website might help to explain.

### **What is it?**

Asbestos is a natural mineral with unusual qualities. It is strong enough to resist high temperatures, chemical attack and wear. A poor conductor, it insulates well against heat and electricity. Asbestos crystals become long, flexible, silky fibres, so it can be made into a wide variety of forms. It can be spun into yarn, woven into cloth or braided into rope. Asbestos can also be added to materials as diverse as cotton and cement. This combination of properties gives asbestos performance capabilities that are difficult to match.

### **What is it used for?**

Asbestos has been used in hundreds of applications and products over the past 4,500 years. The ancient Greeks wove it into oil lamp wicks, funeral shrouds and ceremonial tablecloths. During the 1800s, it insulated the hot engines, boilers and piping that powered the Industrial Revolution. For half a century, until the 1980s, asbestos was used in office buildings, public buildings and schools. It insulated hot water heating systems, and was put into walls and ceilings as insulation against fire and sound. Asbestos has also been widely used in transportation and electrical appliances, frequently mixed with, and encased in, other materials.

Asbestos has also been found in many products around the house. It has been used in clapboard; shingles and felt for roofing; exterior siding; pipe and boiler covering; compounds and cement, such as caulk, putty, roof patching, furnace cement and driveway coating; wallboard; textured and latex paints; acoustical ceiling tiles and plaster; vinyl floor tiles; appliance wiring; hair dryers; irons and ironing board pads; flame-resistant aprons and electric blankets; and clay pottery. Loose-fill vermiculite insulation may contain traces of "amphibole" asbestos.

### **How Has the Use of Asbestos Changed?**

When it became evident that regular exposure to asbestos on the job involved health risks, the public became more concerned about exposure to asbestos in offices and schools, and, eventually, about all asbestos products. This concern has led to a dramatic decline in asbestos use since the early 1980s. The use of asbestos insulation in buildings and heating systems has virtually disappeared. Residential use, for roofing, flooring and appliances, continues to decrease. While alternative products are being developed to replace asbestos, products sold today containing asbestos are regulated under the Hazardous Products Act. Asbestos can be used safely, and public concern has led to improved product design and manufacture. Asbestos is now better encapsulated and sealed to reduce the escape of fibres. Asbestos is valuable in many applications because it has been difficult to find comparable substitute materials. For example, it is still an important component of brake lining and clutch facings.



## **What Health Problems Are Associated With Exposure to Asbestos?**

Asbestos poses health risks only when fibres are in the air that people breathe. Asbestos fibres lodge in the lungs, causing scarring that can ultimately lead to severely impaired lung function (asbestosis) and cancers of the lungs or lung cavity.

Concern for the health of asbestos workers was expressed as long ago as the late 1800s. The risks became more evident in the late 1960s, when workers who had been heavily exposed 20 to 30 years earlier showed increased incidence of lung disease. Occupational exposure is now strictly regulated by provincial governments.

## **When can asbestos be a problem in the home?**

Frequent or prolonged exposure to asbestos fibres may bring health risks. This can happen with the release of fibres into the air when asbestos-containing products break down, either through deterioration as they age or when they are cut. People put themselves at risk, often without realizing it, if they do not take proper precautions when repairs or renovations disturb asbestos containing materials. For example:

- Disturbing loose fill vermiculite insulation which may contain asbestos.
- Ripping away old asbestos insulation from around a hot water system.
- Disturbing or removing building materials that might contain asbestos, such as: roofing shingles, roofing felt, siding containing asbestos, vinyl asbestos floor tiles, acoustical ceiling tiles containing asbestos, older water-based asbestos coatings such as roofing compounds, spackling, sealants, paint, putty, caulking, plaster or drywall.

## **What to do?**

If you do not know if products in your home contain asbestos, have an experienced contractor inspect them. If there is asbestos, the best interim measure (unless the product is peeling or deteriorating) is to seal the surface temporarily so that fibres will not be released into indoor air. If the product is already protected or isolated, simply leave it alone.

It is a complex and expensive matter to remove asbestos, and should be done by an experienced contractor. When disturbing an asbestos product, maximum precautions must be taken to safeguard the workers and anybody else who may be nearby. Asbestos dust must remain within the work area so that it cannot be breathed in by unprotected persons.

## **Want More Information?**

As mentioned at the beginning, this information has been taken from the CMHC website. This fact sheet is part of the “About Your House – General Series.” To view the article in its entirety go to [www.cmhc](http://www.cmhc).