

Firefighters and Asbestos

Asbestos risk in the firefighters' environment

By Ruby Cartagena



Firefighters encounter an assortment of construction materials when entering an old building, and that might include asbestos. Asbestos was used in home construction for decades because it resists fire. In the 1970s builders started phasing out use of asbestos-containing materials. Legacy asbestos from decades ago remains a potential hazard in older buildings.

Many old buildings have asbestos products in the wall insulation, roofing, and flooring. You can't always identify asbestos just by looking at it. Respirators and masks should protect you from inhaled asbestos fibers which may be released during material disintegration from either the fire or water impact on old walls. OSHA-approved

respirators include Air Filtration Respirators (AFR) and Environment-Supplying Respirators (ESR).

The real danger occurs during the overhaul stage when firefighters have the blaze under control and search for remaining hotspots. Often this is done without the use of any respiratory protection and asbestos fibers can then be inhaled along with many other dangerous chemicals. The hazards of asbestos are well documented. Exposure can lead to asbestosis, [mesothelioma cancer](http://www.mesotheliomaweb.org), or [lung cancer](http://www.lung-cancer.com),. Often the symptoms of these diseases don't show until years after exposure. Be sure to stay aware of chemical and fiber hazards when entering any structure built prior to 1980.

Common older items that include asbestos are:

Steam pipes, boilers and furnace ducts insulated with an asbestos blanket or asbestos paper tape.

Resilient floor tiles made of vinyl asbestos, asphalt and rubber; backing on **vinyl sheet flooring** and **adhesives** used in the installation process.

Cement sheets, millboard and paper used as insulation around furnaces and woodburning stoves.

Door gaskets found on furnaces, wood stoves and coal stoves.

Soundproofing or **decorative materials** sprayed on walls and ceilings.

Patching compounds, joint compounds and **textured paint** used on walls and ceilings.

Asbestos cement roofing, shingles and **siding materials**.

Artificial ashes and **embers** for use in gas fireplaces.

Elevated asbestos levels can occur in homes where asbestos-containing materials are damaged or disturbed. It is best to leave undamaged asbestos material alone if it is not likely to be disturbed.

You can't always identify asbestos just by looking at it unless you have experience. Only qualified professionals should remove asbestos so be sure to leave any asbestos you find intact and unbroken.

**For more information, visit –*

<http://www.mesotheliomaweb.org/firesection1.htm>