

Flood recovery: Asbestos in flood damaged homes and buildings

WorkSafe is providing information to home owners and tenants about the dangers of asbestos-containing materials when cleaning up after a flood.

Background

Home owners and tenants do not have the same obligations under occupational health and safety legislation as employers and self-employed persons, but there are still steps they can take to reduce the risk of exposure to asbestos when cleaning up after a flood.

Asbestos-containing materials (ACM) are very common in buildings and structures built before 1990. They are commonly found in:

- walls
- splash backs
- vinyl floor coverings
- roofs
- eaves
- fences
- electrical switchboards

Most ACM found within homes are non-friable (intact or bonded securely), such as cement sheet. When non-friable ACM is in good condition and not disturbed, it normally does not release asbestos fibres into the air. Friable ACM, such as asbestos backing of some vinyl floor coverings, can be broken up easily, releasing fibres that can be breathed in. Asbestos becomes a potential risk to health if fibres in the air are breathed into the lungs.

For more information about where asbestos can be found in the home go to asbestos.vic.gov.au

During floods building materials, including ACM, can be damaged and become dislodged. The material can be picked up by flood waters and moved from property to property. After a flood, debris including ACM may be found in homes or in community spaces such as parks and ovals. As wet ACM dries it can release airborne asbestos fibres, which can be breathed in.

Asbestos risks

After a flood, home owners and tenants will want to start cleaning up their properties as quickly as possible. It is recommended that you do not start cleaning up your property until you are advised that it is safe to do so by emergency services, utilities companies or local council. Before starting to clean up your property after a flood, consider the following hazards:

- Electrical hazards, such as fallen live power lines or active solar panels.
- Unstable buildings and structures. These may not be safe to enter or walk over.
- Disrupted sewerage services which can cause health risks.
- Building rubble containing hazardous materials, such as ACM.

For more information about safely cleaning up after a flood, go to betterhealth.vic.gov.au

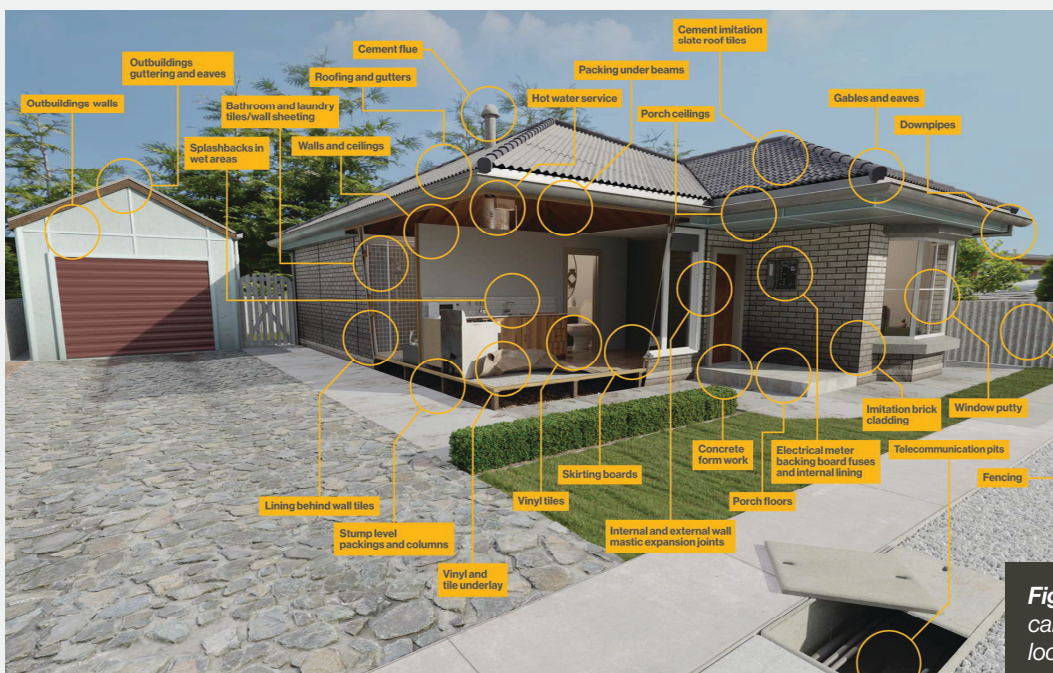


Figure 1: Asbestos can be found in many locations in home.

Controlling risks

Identifying asbestos

WorkSafe recommends having the site assessed for the presence of ACM before you start cleaning up. The assessment should be done by a competent person with the appropriate knowledge, skills and experience, for example an occupational hygienist with asbestos experience. If you are unsure if your house or a structure contains asbestos, treat it like it does until you can have the site assessed.

Removing asbestos

WorkSafe recommends using a licensed asbestos removalist to remove any ACM. Licensed asbestos removalists are trained professionals who are authorised by WorkSafe Victoria to remove asbestos. A list of asbestos removalists can be found at [worksafe.vic.gov.au/asbestos](https://www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/asbestos)

If you decide to undertake asbestos removal work in your own home, it is important to make sure it is done in a way that is without risk to yourself or other persons. WorkSafe notes that the disposal of any ACM should be done in accordance with EPA and local government requirements. For more information go to [epa.vic.gov.au](https://www.epa.vic.gov.au)

If you are removing ACM in your own home, WorkSafe recommends:

- Wearing appropriate personal protective equipment, such as:
 - Sturdy footwear and heavy-duty gloves to protect from sharp objects.
 - Disposable coveralls, which can be thrown out with the ACM after use.
 - Respiratory protection, such as a P2 respirator to filter out fine particles including asbestos fibres. P2 disposable respirators can be purchased from hardware stores. Do not use ordinary paper dust masks, handkerchiefs or bandannas as these will not filter out the fine asbestos particles.
- Keeping the ACM damp.
- Wrapping or bagging all ACM in heavy duty (0.2mm) thick plastic and seal with tape or a knot. Heavy duty plastic can be purchased from hardware stores.
- Labelling the outside with 'Caution – Asbestos Waste'.
- Disposing of the asbestos waste at a licenced landfill. Contact your local council to find out where to dispose of asbestos waste in your area or go to [epa.vic.gov.au](https://www.epa.vic.gov.au)

To reduce the risk of exposure to asbestos fibres avoid:

- Removing ACM that is still in place and not damaged. Only broken and dislodged ACM should be removed.
- Removing vinyl floor coverings with asbestos backing. Residue from asbestos backing can be left on the floor and once dry it can produce airborne asbestos fibres when disturbed. It is recommended that floor covering with asbestos backing be removed by a licenced asbestos removalist.
- Breaking asbestos materials.
- Walking on corrugated asbestos roofs, as they may collapse from the weight.
- Burying asbestos waste.
- Disposing of asbestos waste into general waste bins or with items for kerbside collection.

Cleaning asbestos

If ACM are still in place and not damaged, but require cleaning, WorkSafe recommends:

- Using soapy water with a cloth, sponge or light scrubbing device such as a soft brush or broom. A garden hose can also be used.
- Regularly checking the surface of the material you are cleaning to ensure it is not being damaged.

To reduce the risk of exposure to asbestos fibres avoid:

- Using high-pressure washers or water blasters. These can damage the ACM, spreading asbestos containing debris and releasing airborne asbestos fibres.
- Using power tools or any abrasive materials such as sanders on asbestos materials.

Further information

- [worksafe.vic.gov.au/asbestos](https://www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/asbestos)
- [asbestos.vic.gov.au](https://www.asbestos.vic.gov.au)

If you're unsure what to do, contact WorkSafe's Advisory Service for more information.

WorkSafe Advisory Service

WorkSafe's advisory service is available between 7:30am and 6:30pm Monday to Friday. If you need more support, you can also contact WorkSafe using the Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS National) or the National Relay Service.

 **1300 136 089**