

Avoid exposure to asbestos and “think before you drill”

With many DIY enthusiasts using the Easter holiday period to make home improvements, health experts are warning to beware of exposure to asbestos and to “think before you drill”.

Professor Nico Van Zandwijk, Director of the Asbestos Disease Research Institute (ADRI), Bernie Banton Centre at Concord Hospital, said it is extremely important that people know how dangerous asbestos is and the precautions to take.

“From the Second World War to the mid-late 1980s asbestos was widely used in a multitude of building materials,” Prof Van Zandwijk said.

“Breathing in asbestos fibres can cause asbestosis and malignant mesothelioma”.

“Most people are exposed to a small amount of asbestos fibres in their daily lives and are not at risk. However asbestos-related health problems can occur when people are unaware of the hazards of working with asbestos products.

“The important thing is to always avoid the release of fibres from asbestos material,” he said.

“Do not use power tools or cut into materials where asbestos may be suspected as asbestos fibres can be released.”

“The most accurate way to find out if your home contains asbestos is to have a licensed asbestos removal contractor carry out an inspection as you can’t tell just by looking” Prof Van Zandwijk said.

Do not disturb soil or any other material thought to be contaminated with asbestos fibres. Short-term precautions to minimise exposure include:

- spraying with water to prevent soil/dust from becoming airborne, being careful around electrical fittings.
- covering with plastic sheeting or a tarpaulin if possible to avoid exposure to the weather.
- preventing access by children, and/or pets.
- cover children's toys.
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- use wet cleanup procedures rather than dry sweeping or vacuuming.
- where loose asbestos fibre insulation may have been installed do not enter the roof space & restrict access to the roof cavity through the man-hole and vents.

If you must enter areas of your home thought to be contaminated with dust containing asbestos fibres use the appropriate Australian Standards (AS) approved respirator or dust mask recommended for the job (see manufacturer's recommendation).

WorkCover NSW has a guideline on asbestos removal. Contact the WorkCover Assistance Service on 13 10 50 for a copy or visit www.workcover.nsw.gov.au and download a copy of the publication.

Issued by Sydney South West Area Health Service Media and Communications Unit. For further information contact James Yeandel on (02) 9515 9607