

I Have Asbestos in my House... Now What?!?!?!

In January's blog we delved into the muddy waters of DIY home renovations and maintenance... should you, shouldn't you? Why, why not? We came to the conclusion that there are certain times and circumstances where Doing-It-Yourself was just not a good idea. Well here is another one of those circumstances... when dealing with asbestos – the silent killer.

What is asbestos?

There has been so much media coverage of asbestos and its negative health effects in recent years. Yet, there is still so much confusion and panic in the community about what it is, and what should be done about it during home maintenance or renovations.

Asbestos is a naturally occurring mineral fibre which, until recently, was mined from the earth. Asbestos was used in the construction and car manufacturing industries because of its attractive properties like: strength, flexibility, and resistance to heat, chemicals and harsh electrical conditions. As a result of these seemingly ideal properties, asbestos was used in about 3000 products manufactured worldwide (Asbestos Industry Association). As far as the construction industry was concerned, the strength and heat resistance of asbestos made it perfect for insulation materials, and was also used in cement sheeting in walls, ceilings and roof cladding.

More recently though, the health risks associated with asbestos have been realised, and as a result the use of this material is now completely banned in Australia. There is also strict new legislation relating to the handling and removal of asbestos which has been used in older properties.

What are the health risks?

Specifically, the issue with asbestos from a health perspective is that asbestos fibres are very fine (not visible to the naked eye), and these fibres enter the respiratory tract when people breathe in or swallow. The particles can become embedded in the respiratory system where they sit and cause disease over a period of time, sometimes as long as 10 or even 50 years down the track. Education about the health risks of asbestos and making sure people are aware of how it actually works is so important. Typically, asbestos seems to result in the following diseases:

- Asbestosis – the creation of scar tissue between the alveoli, which are spread over the lungs.
- Mesothelioma - a rare tumour of the chest lining, abdominal lining and sometimes the heart lining, effecting 1 in every 100,000 males, and 0.3 in every 100,000 females (Asbestos Industry Association). This disease typically takes 20-50 years to appear, and this is one of the factors which has made asbestos so dangerous in previous times – no one knew it was making them sick until it was too late!

- Lung cancer – the growth of tumours on the lungs which eventually obstruct the airways. While asbestos is not the only cause of lung cancer, and the various potential causes of lung cancers cannot actually be differentiated, it is known that the combination of smoking and being an ex-asbestos worker multiplies the risk of death by 10 (Asbestos Industry Association).

So, if asbestos can be fatal at the worst, or cause serious illness at best, what should you do about it? Basically, if asbestos materials are left undisturbed (provided they are in relatively good condition), they will not generate the airborne fibres which create the abovementioned health risks. However, if any asbestos materials are in poor condition, or you are intending to renovate your home or conduct some much-needed home maintenance, then you may find yourself up against asbestos in your walls, ceilings, outdoor sheds and other parts of your property. For your own protection and safety, the Queensland Government has issued new legislation that prohibits home and property owners from handling and removing asbestos without the use of experts. This is where Brisbane Maintenance Experts can help!

What does this mean for me?

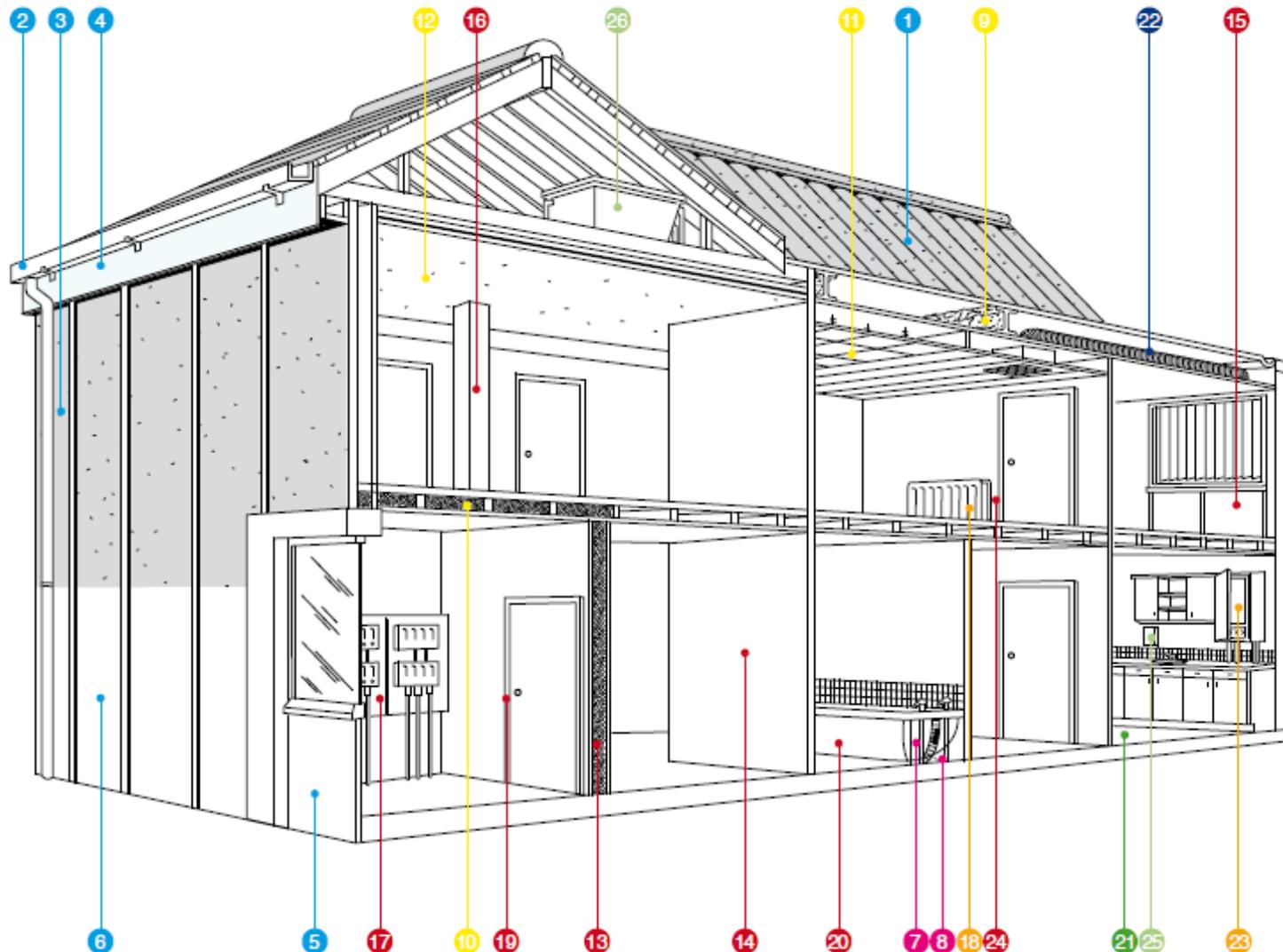
Firstly, you need to identify IF you have any asbestos in your property. As already mentioned, asbestos is not always visible with the naked eye. However, based on past building practices, there are some typical locations where you are more likely to find asbestos in your home. The Household Guide below, provided by the Asbestos Industry Association, indicates the common places where you might find asbestos in your property. This is a really useful tool if you are planning on conducting any renovations or home maintenance. By way of summary, the most likely places you will find asbestos will be:

- Wall and roof materials on the outside of the home
- Lining under the eaves
- Imitation brick cladding
- In/around electrical metre boards
- Backyard sheds, carports, garages and even old dog kennels
- Interior walls
- Sheet materials in wet areas
- Vinyl floor tiles, backing cushions to vinyl flooring, and underlay for ceramic tiles
- Insulation materials in heaters and stoves

Do you have asbestos at home?

Typical locations for the most common asbestos-containing materials around the home.

- Roof and exterior walls**
 - 1. Roof sheets and tiles
 - 2. Guttering and drainpipe
 - 3. Wall cladding
 - 4. Fascia boards
 - 5. Panel beneath window
 - 6. Coating to metal wall cladding
- Pipework**
 - 7. Lagging on pipework
 - 8. Damaged lagging and associated debris
- Ceilings**
 - 9. Spray coating to ceiling, walls, beams/columns
 - 10. Loose asbestos in ceiling/floor cavity
 - 11. Tiles, slats, canopies and firebreaks above ceilings
 - 12. Textured coatings and paints
- Interior walls/panels**
 - 13. Loose asbestos inside partition walls
 - 14. Partition walls
 - 15. Panel beneath window
 - 16. Panelling to vertical and horizontal beams
 - 17. Panel behind electrical equipment
 - 18. Panel behind/under heater
 - 19. Panel on (or inside) fire door
 - 20. Bath panel
- Floor materials**
 - 21. Floor tiles, linoleum and paper backing, lining to suspended floor
- Air handling systems**
 - 22. Lagging
- Domestic appliances**
 - 23. Gaskets, rope seals and panels in domestic boilers
 - 24. Insulating blocks, panels, paper, string etc. in domestic heater
- Other**
 - 25. Fire blanket
 - 26. Water tank



The AIA is happy to field enquiries from the public, and provide advice or help on any asbestos issue. Phone (07) 3870 5561 during business hours.

So, let's say that you have established that you DO have asbestos in your home. Now, you need to determine what TYPE. Yes... there are different types! **Unbonded (friable)** asbestos refers to materials that contain asbestos in a powder form, or materials that can be easily crumbled, pulverised and turned into a powder. Unbonded asbestos might be found in thermal lagging such as pipe insulation, or sprayed asbestos in fire retardants. This form of asbestos tends to pose a greater health risk due to its powdery consistency and form, creating and spreading lots of nasty airborne particles.

Bonded (non friable) asbestos materials are those where the asbestos fibres have been reinforced with a binding agent. As a result, these materials tend to pose a lower health risk because the asbestos particles are only released in smaller amounts, providing the materials are left undisturbed.

So, based on the type of asbestos you find, your course of action will be different. The legislation (below) will dictate what you can and cannot do with each type of asbestos, but you should also consider:

- The condition of the asbestos – if it is in good condition, you may be better off leaving it alone.
- The alternatives to removing asbestos – maybe you can paint/seal/cover the area.
- Your ability to comply with the new rules and regulations pertaining to asbestos removal (see below and also see http://www.health.qld.gov.au/asbestos/home_renovators/need_to_know.asp).
- Whether a licensed asbestos removalist is necessary.

What are the rules & regulations in Queensland?

New asbestos laws were put in place in June 2007 for homeowners, renovators and owner builders. These laws are for the protection of you, your family and your neighbours, so they should not be taken lightly. A full copy of the legislation can be found at the following link

<http://www.legislation.qld.gov.au/LEGISLTN/SLS/2007/07SL086.pdf>.

But to summarise, the most important and practical things you need to know are:

- If you have unbonded/friable asbestos (the powdery, more dangerous type), you must have a licensed asbestos removalist handle the asbestos. It is *illegal* to attempt to remove and dispose of this type of asbestos yourself, no matter how much of a handyman or handywoman you may be!
- If you have bonded/non friable asbestos, you may or may not need a licence to remove it, depending on how much asbestos you are dealing with. If you are removing 10 square metres or *more* of asbestos, you require an asbestos removal licence or you will have to employ someone that holds a licence. This is where home maintenance experts come into play. We have the licences or contacts with licence holders, to ensure that your asbestos is removed properly and safely. However, if you are removing *less* than 10 square metres, you do not require a licence or licensed operator.
- Asbestos waste must be immediately double wrapped or bagged in thick plastic, sealed with tape and labelled with the specified safety warning.
- Asbestos waste must be disposed of at a council approved site as quickly as possible.

- Asbestos must never be cleaned with high pressure water cleaners, compressed air, or cut with power tools. This is because each of these methods causes the greatest amount of disruption and pulverisation of the asbestos material.
- Removed asbestos must never be stored, sold or donated.

Source: Asbestos Industry Council

The continued education of the public about asbestos and its potential dangers is an important step in the health and safety of home owners, owner builders and those working in the construction industry. Home maintenance professionals like Brisbane Maintenance Experts can help you with your asbestos removal needs by ensuring the correct licences are obtained and the asbestos is removed safely, efficiently and in accordance with all legislation and safety guidelines. This is definitely one situation where DIY is *not* a good idea because your life *really* could depend on it!

All content presented in our blogs is advice only, and for the sole purpose of education and information. Brisbane Maintenance Experts are not to be held responsible for any decisions or actions that their readers may take.

© Brisbane Maintenance Experts 2013