



Your Health and Loose Fill Asbestos Insulation

July 2022

OVERVIEW

For over 50 years, houses affected by loose fill asbestos insulation or Mr Fluffy have been part of the Canberra community. Over time many people have lived in, worked on or in, provided services to, or routinely visited affected houses and are interested to understand any health risks.

There can be a range of reactions to learning you have lived in, worked on or in or even visited a property affected by loose fill asbestos insulation. Understanding any risk is the key to establishing the potential for health effects, both physical and emotional. The chances of developing an asbestos related disease increase with the cumulative exposure to asbestos fibres that a person can breathe in during their lifetime.

KEY DETAILS

- Asbestos is a naturally occurring mineral fibre which was used extensively in products due to their strength, insulating features and resistance to fire.
- Just because a person has been exposed to loose fill asbestos insulation does not mean they will develop an asbestos related medical condition.
- The chance of developing an asbestos related disease increases with the cumulative exposure to asbestos fibres a person breathes in during their lifetime.
- To date, most people who have developed asbestos related disease have been exposed to a relatively large number of fibres throughout their work, e.g. miners, builders.

WHAT IS ASBESTOS?

Asbestos is the name given to a group of naturally occurring mineral fibres which were used extensively in many products due to their strength, insulating features and resistance to fire.

The most common asbestos types used in Australia were chrysotile (white asbestos), amosite (brown asbestos) and crocidolite (blue asbestos). Chrysotile was used until 2003 in products such as brake linings, paint and insulation. Amosite and crocidolite were used until the mid-1980s, most commonly in building materials, e.g. asbestos-cement products, also known as 'fibro' and 'AC' sheeting.

WHAT IS MR FLUFFY LOOSE FILL ASBESTOS INSULATION?

Loose fill asbestos insulation is finely crushed asbestos. Up to two million fibres can be found under microscope on a sample the size of a 50 cent piece.

It was blown into roof spaces in Canberra homes between 1968 and 1979. Over time this material has travelled to other areas such as wall cavities and subfloors, and has sometimes been present in visible quantities in cupboards, heating and cooling ducts and vents, living rooms and bedrooms.

WHAT ARE THE HEALTH EFFECTS OF ASBESTOS EXPOSURE?

Asbestos is a risk to health only when it is inhaled (breathed in) as fine dust. The risk to health increases with the number of fibres inhaled and with frequency of exposure. When asbestos dust is inhaled, larger fibres tend to be cleared by protective mechanisms in the lungs and upper respiratory tract. The finer fibres are more difficult to remove, and may become trapped in the lungs, or move further into the body.

There are a number of diseases that can be related to inhaled asbestos fibres:

- pleural plaques - thickening of tissue around the lungs;
- asbestosis - scarring of lung tissue;
- mesothelioma - malignant tumours that can develop around the lungs or intestine.

Smoking increases the risk of developing lung cancer following exposure to asbestos.

To date, most people who have developed asbestos related diseases have been exposed to a relatively large number of fibres through their work, e.g. miners, builders.

Diseases related to the deposit and penetration of asbestos fibres can take a long time to develop after initial exposure to asbestos, i.e. at least 20 to 30 years after the first exposure.

The table below indicates the low prevalence of mesothelioma for ACT residents when compared with more common forms of cancer.

Cancer	Incidence per 100,000
Mesothelioma	2.8
Colorectal cancer	56.4
Melanoma of the skin	40.1
Lung	31.4

Table 1: Age-standardised incidence rates for mesothelioma and common cancers that affect both males and females, ACT, 2014.

Source: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) 2017 Australian Cancer Incidence and Mortality (ACIM) books: Canberra: AIHW

Just because a person has been exposed to loose fill asbestos does not mean they will develop any asbestos related medical conditions.

HOW CAN I UNDERSTAND MY RISK?

All urban residents are exposed to low levels of asbestos in the environment, including from natural sources, industrial material and buildings.

The ACT Chief Health Officer has advised that the risk of developing asbestos related disease increases in proportion to the total number of fibres a person breathes in during their lifetime.

Most people who develop an asbestos related medical condition have been exposed to high concentrations of fibres, or exposed over many years, in occupational settings like mining, construction and machinery shops.

In general typical exposure scenarios for Mr Fluffy loose fill asbestos include:

- **VERY LOW RISK** - General public - asbestos is a naturally occurring substance and the air has a low level of asbestos fibres.
- **VERY LOW RISK** - Visitors/ Neighbours/Care and Service Providers - short periods of exposure.
- **LOW RISK** - Former Residents – depending on condition of the houses, length of residence, safe renovation and home maintenance activity.
- **LOW TO MEDIUM RISK** - Tradespeople - short periods of exposure while working in an affected house carries a low risk and the use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) reduces the risk even further. However, cumulative exposure to asbestos fibres over time and/or activity undertaken without appropriate PPE safety equipment would increase risk.

VISITORS, NEIGHBOURS, CARE AND SERVICE PROVIDERS

Short periods of exposure to low-levels of asbestos like what might occur in visiting a house with Mr Fluffy insulation, carries a very low risk of developing asbestos related illness.

The risk to care workers and service providers visiting affected homes is no different to the risk to private visitors; short periods of exposure to low-levels of asbestos carries a very low risk of developing asbestos related illness.

Those who continue to visit Mr Fluffy houses should refer to their employer's workplace health and safety guidelines, which may require risk minimisation obligations such as the use of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).

For anyone entering a Mr Fluffy home, it is important that you request to see an Asbestos Management Plan (AMP). AMP's are prepared by a licensed asbestos assessor to identify any contamination of the house and recommend management actions to reduce the risk of exposure.

FORMER RESIDENTS

Provided that the Mr Fluffy property was maintained in good condition, the residual loose fill asbestos was left undisturbed and residents did not have direct contact with the fibres through inhalation or ingestion, the risks of residing in a Mr Fluffy home are low.

Even where residents have undertaken renovations that may have breached the ceiling or wall cavities or subfloor, the risk remains low. Short periods of exposure to loose fill asbestos, as might occur during renovations, carries a low risk of developing asbestos related illness. The risk is even lower if Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) was used.

You may be concerned about friends, family, service providers and tradespeople who visited or worked on or in your affected property. Remember that just because a person has been exposed to loose fill asbestos does not mean they will develop any asbestos related medical conditions.

TRADESPEOPLE

Most people who develop an asbestos related medical condition have been exposed to high concentrations of fibres, or have been exposed over many years, in occupational settings like mining, construction and machinery shops.

Short periods of exposure to loose fill asbestos, as might occur when working on a house with Mr Fluffy insulation, carries a low risk of developing asbestos related illness. If you used Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) as prescribed by occupational health and safety guidelines, then the risk is even lower.

For anyone entering a Mr Fluffy home, it is important that you request to see an Asbestos Management Plan (AMP). AMP's are prepared by a licensed asbestos assessor to identify any contamination of the house and recommend management actions to reduce the risk of exposure.

WHAT SHOULD I DO IF I AM CONCERNED ABOUT MY HEALTH?

People who are concerned about their health should seek advice from their general practitioner who can provide an assessment of individual circumstances and asbestos exposure risks.

ENQUIRIES

Call Access Canberra on 13 22 81 and ask to speak with the Loose Fill Asbestos Coordination Team, or email loosefillasbestos@act.gov.au.

ACCESSIBILITY

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