

# Asbestos: Danger hiding in plain sight

Today in British Columbia, it seems you can't walk down the street without seeing a home being renovated or demolished. Many of the building materials used in these older homes contain asbestos. And while many homeowners know what asbestos is, a recent survey indicates that they do not know that they have a role to play in keeping workers safe from asbestos exposure on their home reno or demo project.

WorkSafeBC conducted a survey of adults in B.C. — where we learned that only about half of those surveyed believe that homeowners are responsible for making sure that testing for asbestos is done before renovations begin. Furthermore, only about a third (36 percent) of those who have renovated a pre-1990s home in the past five years recall testing for the presence of asbestos prior to doing their renos.

On the heels of these survey results, WorkSafeBC is enhancing the work we already do with workers and employers in B.C. about the dangers of asbestos exposure — and has launched an awareness campaign to homeowners about the role they play in keeping everyone on their project healthy and safe.

“Asbestos was used extensively in residential construction throughout the 1960s, 70s, and to the end of the 1980s, primarily because of its superior insulation and fireproofing properties,” says Al Johnson, vice-president of Prevention Services at WorkSafeBC. As long as those building materials aren't disturbed, asbestos won't be released into the air. But when those building materials are drilled, sawed, sanded, or broken apart during a home renovation or demolition — asbestos is released into the air and can easily be inhaled.

If workers breathe in enough asbestos, their lungs can be permanently damaged, and they can contract lung

## Did you know?

**584 workers**

From 2006–2015, 584 workers died in B.C. from diseases related to asbestos exposure



**49 workers**

In 2015, 49 workers died in B.C. from asbestos-related diseases (7 to asbestosis, 10 to lung cancer, 32 to mesothelioma)



**30%**

From 2011–2015, almost 30% of all asbestos-related deaths were in the construction industry

disease or cancer. Asbestos-related disease is the leading cause of workplace death in B.C.: in 2015, 49 workers died from asbestos-related diseases including asbestosis, lung cancer, and mesothelioma. “Asbestos kills,” says Johnson, “and it needs to be taken seriously by homeowners, whether they own single-family homes, town homes, or condominiums.”

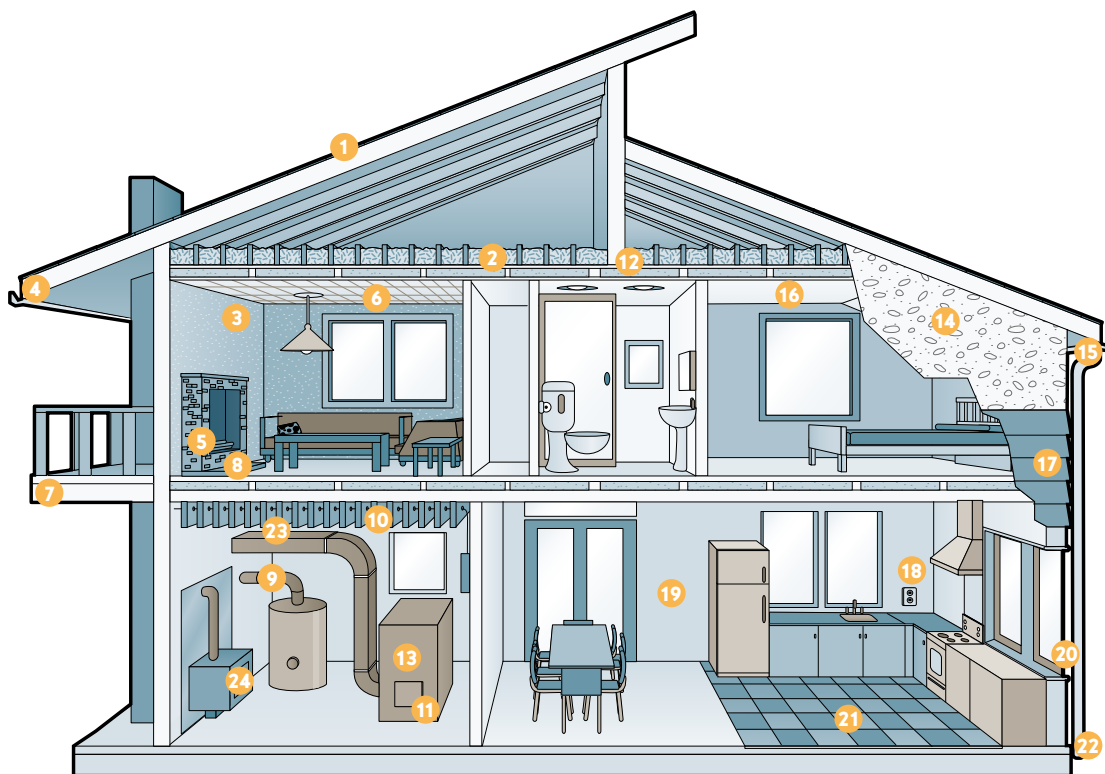
## How do I know if a building has asbestos?

Many homeowners do not know where to begin when it comes to preventing asbestos exposure, but it may not be as complicated as people think. “Our message is threefold: Think about asbestos; identify it; then remove it — before work begins on your home,” says Johnson.

Homeowners need to know the potential areas where asbestos may be hiding, and have those areas tested before sending in workers to perform a renovation or

demolition. Asbestos can be found in more than 3,000 building materials used before 1990, and exposure to it can cause serious health concerns.

“The extent of materials may surprise homeowners,” says Johnson. “Taped and mudded drywall is one potential source of asbestos; so is tape or paper covering forced air ductwork; asphalt roofing material; pipe and electrical insulation; floor tiles; deck undersheeting — the list is extensive.” The following graphic points to just some of the potential sources of asbestos in a pre-1990s home.



- |   |   |  |
|---|---|--|
| 1 Roof felt and shingles                          | 10 Main panel and fuse box; each fuse wire has an individual asbestos flash guard | 17 Asbestos cement (transite) board siding and undersheeting                             |
| 2 Loose, blown-in insulation, such as vermiculite | 11 Door and gasket covers   | 18 Outlets and switches  |
| 3 Incandescent light fixture backing              | 12 Backing behind recessed lighting   | 19 Gypsum board filling compound, and patching and joint compound for walls and ceilings |
| 4 Roof gutters can be made of asbestos cement     | 13 Boiler and furnace insulation  | 20 Window putty  |
| 5 Artificial fireplace logs and ashes             | 14 Asbestos can be found in stucco  | 21 Flooring: vinyl tiles and linoleum sheet flooring; flooring adhesive                  |
| 6 Acoustic tiles                                  | 15 Soffit boards can be made of asbestos cement or asbestos insulating board      | 22 Downpipes can be made of asbestos cement  |
| 7 Deck under-sheeting                             | 16 Textured or stipple-coated walls and ceilings                                  | 23 Insulation on electrical wires  |
| 8 Asbestos pad under the fireplace hearth         |   | 24 Heat reflector for wood stove   |
| 9 Pipe insulation                                 |   |  |

## Getting asbestos safely removed

In order to properly identify asbestos in a pre-1990 built home, homeowners must hire a qualified testing company or asbestos surveyor. The testing company or surveyor will take samples of possible asbestos-containing materials, and send them to a lab for testing. The surveyor will then produce a report of the location of asbestos in the home.

The next step is to have the asbestos removed by a qualified abatement contractor, who uses the surveyor's report to safely remove and contain all of the materials identified as containing asbestos. Lists of abatement contractors can be obtained from the Hazardous Materials Association of B.C. or the B.C. Association of Restoration Contractors. Once the job is done, the abatement contractor will provide a report confirming that all asbestos has been removed, and that the property is ready for demolition or renovation.

## Think asbestos

WorkSafeBC is reaching out to homeowners to raise awareness about the role they play in keeping workers safe on a project. We are promoting greater health and safety awareness of asbestos and its proper removal from your home. From 2006–2015, 584 workers died in B.C. from diseases related to asbestos exposure, and more than 400 workers reported being exposed to asbestos in 2015.

Dealing with asbestos up-front in a renovation or demolition project will cost extra time and money. Al Johnson acknowledges this and maintains that “considering the well-documented risks of asbestos exposure, we think investing in the health and safety of homeowners and workers is money well spent.”

Homeowners can prevent asbestos exposure by knowing whether a property is at risk for asbestos, and making sure that asbestos-containing materials are properly identified and removed before anyone starts work on a reno or demo.

For more information and resources for the hazards of asbestos, visit [thinkasbestos.com](http://thinkasbestos.com). ☺

# ASBESTOS

danger hiding in plain sight

Often present in homes built before 1990, asbestos can be found in more than 3,000 different building materials. It's colourless, odourless, and deadly.

As a homeowner, you should make asbestos testing and removal a priority before work begins to ensure the health and safety of everyone working on your project.

[thinkasbestos.com](http://thinkasbestos.com)

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