Asbestos Uses and Dangers

The naturally occurring mineral asbestos was widely used in a variety of building components. This unique mineral acts as a superb fire retardant, is resistant to heat and rot, and performs as an excellent insulator. Due to these qualities, producers of construction materials mixed asbestos into paints, glues, cements, fiberboard, insulation, roofing, siding, flooring, and paper in order to enrich such building materials with asbestos' advantageous characteristics.

Asbestos pipe insulation

Asbestos cement roofing shingles

Thankfully, as long as asbestos fibers remain bound in these materials, it does not present a serious health hazard. However, when asbestos-containing materials are damaged or disturbed, toxic fibers can be released into the air. These microscopic asbestos fibers are easily inhaled and it is extremely difficult for the body to expel them. In fact, exposure to asbestos can cause a variety of illnesses, such as lung cancer, asbestosis, and mesothelioma, a rare form of cancer that affects the body's mesothelial linings of the lungs, heart, and abdomen. Asbestos is also known to cause gastrointestinal cancer and has been linked to colon cancer as well. Typically, these diseases do not exhibit symptoms for 15 to 50 years after initial exposure, making them especially difficult to diagnose.

Where to Spot and How to Avoid Asbestos

Since most structures built before the 1980s contain asbestos, it is important to know the common places to find asbestos in order to spot and avoid exposure. Spotting asbestos products that are not clearly labeled is practically impossible with the human eye, so testing is the only way to know if a product contains asbestos. Make sure not to sample the product yourself, which comes with the risk of releasing asbestos fibers into the air. Rather, hire a professional to take a sample for testing. Some possible sources of asbestos in homes include the following:

- Tile and sheet vinyl flooring (adhesives applied in flooring also contained asbestos)
- Roofing materials, such as tiles, felt, and adhesives
- Textured plaster used in acoustical ceiling treatment (and decoratively along walls and ceilings)

- Sheet products: millboard, rollboard, and others
- Joint compounds and plaster used to patch holes and seams
- Insulation: including wall insulation, pipe covering, electrical tape and wadding, and in stoves and furnaces

Hire a Professional

There are a variety of professionals available for asbestos abatement. Whether you want to remove the asbestos-containing materials completely, or choose to cover them in some way, a licensed professional offers safety and security, as removing asbestos on your own is exceptionally hazardous. Professionals can perform air quality tests before, during, and after the remediation process. Air monitoring can be particularly reassuring if your family or employees are present during the abatement.

Professional asbestos abatement

For more resources on asbestos, the various forms of asbestos cancer, and other illnesses caused by asbestos exposure, please visit the Mesothelioma Cancer Center.