Australia

A complete ban on asbestos-containing material in Australia was introduced in 1991 although some building materials in storage were still being used in the years that followed. Queensland began regulation of asbestos removal and disposal in 2005. Handlers of asbestos materials must have a B-Class license for bonded asbestos and an A-Class license for friable asbestos.

The town of Wittenoom, in Western Australia was built around a (blue) asbestos mine. The town has since been closed, and is contaminated. However one couple remains there, refusing to leave the area and refusing to believe in current medical advice. Conversely, the town of Asbestos, in Quebec, which remains the world's largest open pit asbestos mine, retains a significant population, albeit one that aged as a result of the failure of Magnola, a multi-million dollar plant designed to extract magnesium from asbestos tailings.

Why is Asbestos Dangerous?

In the early 1900s medical practitioners began to raise concerns that exposure to asbestos was causing deaths of asbestos workers through respiratory diseases and by the 1930s there was a substantial accumulation of scientific knowledge concerning asbestos related disease.

Almost everyone in our society has been exposed to some asbestos fibres, but for most people the exposure and the risk are very small. When the asbestos is disturbed it forms a dust of tiny fibres, which can easily be breathed in.

Asbestos fibres can split down, reducing in size until they are small enough to travel deep into the body where they pierce the lining of the lungs. The body does not have a mechanism for removing materials from this deep within the lungs and as the asbestos fibres are embedded in the lining, they will remain in the body for the rest of that person's life.

Asbestos related diseases are caused by the inhalation or ingestion of these particles of asbestos. The diseases caused by exposure include asbestosis, pleural plaques, lung cancer, mesothelioma and cancer of the intestinal tract.

Asbestos related disease is generally associated with inhaling asbestos over a long time. However, a small number of people may develop mesothelioma after brief exposure.

The reason why this occurs is not known so it is always important to keep exposure to asbestos fibres as low as possible. Over 2500 people are diagnosed with asbestos related diseases in Australia each year and the number is rising.

People who have been exposed to asbestos fibres in their jobs are at greater risk.

Such jobs include:

- Mining or milling asbestos
- Manufacture and repair of goods using raw asbestos fibres, such as brake linings
- Use of products containing asbestos, for instance in building and construction, heating, shipyards, power stations, boiler making and plumbing
- Alteration, repair or demolition of buildings or other structures containing asbestos

Some people have contracted mesothelioma after brief and unexpected exposure; others 30 years after home renovations or after holiday work as a labourer; and some women have even contract the disease or as a result of shaking and washing their husband's clothes.

Asbestos in Queensland

The widespread use of asbestos in transport, building and manufacturing has resulted in an increasing number of Queenslanders developing asbestos related diseases.

There can be a 20-30 year latent period after asbestos exposure before disease develops, which means many Queenslanders are yet to be diagnosed with lung diseases such as asbestosis, pleural plaques, lung cancer or mesothelioma.

Asbestos has been used in a wide variety of products and may still be found in many products, some of which include:

- Asbestos cement sheet pipe and products used for water supply and sewage piping, casings for electrical wires, fire protection material, chemical tanks, electrical switchboards and residential and industrial building materials such as cement sheeting.

- Friction products such as clutch facings and brake linings for cars.

- Products containing asbestos paper such as table pads and heat protective mats, heat and electrical wire insulation, small appliance components and underlying material for sheet flooring.

- Asbestos textile products such as packing components, roofing materials, heaters.
- Other products including ceiling and floor tiles, gaskets and packing, paints, coating and sealants.

Asbestos products were gradually removed from production during the 1980s. Between 1981 and 1983, asbestos flat sheeting was phased out. In 1985, corrugated products (roofing and cladding) were also taken from production. Asbestos-lined piping was not made after 1987 and in 2003 brake pads and linings ceased to contain asbestos.

New materials are no longer allowed to contain asbestos fibres and people are no longer able to import, manufacture, supply, store, transport, sell, use, reuse, install and replace asbestos-containing materials.

Despite an Australia-wide ban on asbestos being sold, reused and/or imported into Australia after 31 December 2003, some asbestos materials have been imported into Australia and sold or used.

If you have concerns about a product or materials, have it tested by a National Association of Testing Authorities (NATA) accredited laboratory – www.nata.asn.au