

Asbestos bags recycled for use in carpet

Background

The Western Australian Department of Health (WA Health) has found that a significant quantity of hessian bags used to transport asbestos, wool, superphosphate and potatoes were recycled with other material, such as jute and goat hair, to manufacture carpet underlay prior to the early 1970s.

Advice of former employees to WA Health was that bags in good condition were not recycled but cleaned, repaired and then sold to various industries for re-use in transporting wool and other produce as well as asbestos. Only bags that were not repairable were recycled to manufacture carpet underlay. As the bag recycling process involved mechanical shredding, vibrating and cleaning, the majority of asbestos is likely to have been removed at this time. However, it is possible that an amount of asbestos fibres may have remained.

In 2006, WA Health collected some samples of carpet underlay believed to have been installed between the late 1960s to early 1970s. They were tested for asbestos fibres by an accredited laboratory. No evidence of asbestos fibres was found. However, as the number of samples of underlay from this era was low, it cannot be confirmed that this type of underlay has no asbestos fibres.

What does the suspect underlay look like?

The exact characteristics of the suspect underlay are not fully known. However, it is likely to be brown in colour and look like a fibrous mat (see right). It is also likely to be compacted as it has been under the carpet and walked on. In most cases, the underlay was either glued on to a concrete floor or stapled on to a timber floor.

Other types of underlay (eg. rubber, foam) are not known to contain asbestos.



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Was the suspect underlay used in Queensland?

Currently, it cannot be confirmed that the suspect carpet underlay was not used in Queensland.

If it was used, it is reasonable to assume that a large percentage has already been removed as carpets are likely to require replacement every 7-10 years. The suspect carpet underlay was used until the early 1970s – over 30 years ago.

Can a carpet with asbestos contaminated underlay continue to be used?

Yes. You can continue to use and vacuum your carpet. The chance of asbestos fibres being released into the air from the suspect underlay is low as the carpet acts as a physical barrier.

Is there a risk to my or my family's health?

Asbestos is known to cause particular lung diseases. It presents a risk to human health when fibres of a particular size become airborne and are breathed into the deep parts of the lung in sufficient quantity.

If the suspect underlay is installed in your house, the health risk is considered very low if the underlay remains under the carpet and undisturbed. If the underlay is disturbed (eg. for repairs, removal), any asbestos fibres in the underlay may be released into the air where they can be breathed in.

What should I do if I need to repair the carpet or want to remove it?

As a matter of precaution, carpets and carpet underlay laid prior to 1980 should be considered suspect.

No repairs or removal work should commence until the underlay is inspected and, if it looks like the suspect underlay, tested for asbestos.

You can safely inspect your carpet for the suspect underlay. You should wear a "Class P2" face mask (not a dust mask) at all times when undertaking this task (see right). Single-use P2 masks are available from safety equipment stores and some hardware stores. They will state "P2" and "AS/NZS 1716" on the mask.



To inspect the underlay, gently lift a small portion of the carpet to reveal the underlay. If the underlay looks like the suspect underlay, gently put the carpet back down, stop work and contact an asbestos removal and treatment business for further assistance. These businesses can be found in the Yellow Pages and must hold an 'A Class' asbestos removal certificate issued by Workplace Health and Safety Queensland.

Before starting any work, the business should take samples of the underlay and have them analysed by a laboratory accredited for asbestos analysis. Accreditation is issued by the National Association of Testing Authorities (NATA). A list of accredited laboratories in Queensland is available on the NATA Australia website www.nata.asn.au.

If the laboratory finds asbestos in the underlay, removal of the underlay and the carpet must only be carried out by a business with an "A class" asbestos removal certificate issued by Workplace Health and Safety Queensland.

For more information

Call 13 QGOV (13 74 68) or visit www.qld.gov.au/asbestos.

For businesses, please visit the Workplace Health and Safety Queensland website at www.deir.qld.gov.au/workplace/index.htm or call 1300 369 915.