



28 August 2009

Asbestos in Carpet Underlay

The Department of Health is continuing to investigate the possibility of asbestos fibres in some types of old carpet underlay

The ABC 7.30 Report ran a story on 24 August 2009 about potential health risks from hessian bags previously used to transport asbestos and subsequently used in the manufacture of carpet underlay prior to 1970. The concern being that such underlay could still be present in WA homes.

This issue was first raised by the media in 2006 when articles were published in the West Australian newspaper on 24 March 2006 via the Asbestos Diseases Society. The concerns were based on statements/interviews of former employees who had worked in the hessian bag recycling industry or transporting of asbestos from Wittenoom to Perth and had subsequently contracted an asbestos related disease.

In response to the concerns in 2006, the Environmental Health Directorate (EHD) carried out an investigation for evidence of the presence of asbestos fibre in carpet underlay in WA homes. No evidence of asbestos fibres has been found to date.

This website article has now been reviewed following the most recent media coverage in order to provide up-to-date advice to residents.

Answers to some frequently asked questions about the possibility of asbestos fibres in carpet underlay are available here:

http://www.public.health.wa.gov.au/cproot/2462/2/Carpet_underlay_FAQ.pdf

FACTS AS WE CURRENTLY KNOW THEM

The EHD has ascertained that prior to the early 1970's, 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 underfelt.

Advice of former employees 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 of material, it is likely that the majority of asbestos fibres would have been removed during the process and persons most at risk would have those working in that environment.

In 2006, the EHD collected several samples of carpet underfelt believed to have been installed prior to the early 1970's. These were tested by a National Association of Testing Authorities (NATA) Laboratory with results confirming there were no asbestos fibres. The Asbestos Diseases Society has also had some samples tested that were also found not to contain asbestos.

However, the number of samples available from this era for testing has been low, so EHD is cautious about suggesting that there is absolutely no risk.



FURTHER REQUEST FOR SAMPLE TESTING

To date, it has been difficult to obtain samples of 'original' carpet underfelt in excess of 35 years old. The EHD is reiterating its request for further samples of underlay installed prior to 1970 that have the appearance of the material shown below.

If you have carpet underlay of this era and are concerned about it, please contact the Department's Environmental Hazards Unit on 9388 4999 to determine whether a sample of the underlay should be collected and tested and for advice on collecting a sample safely.

PRECAUTIONS WHEN REMOVING OLD CARPET

Although it is unlikely that carpet underlay will contain asbestos fibres, the EHD is advising householders to take standard precautions when removing old carpet and underlay. These include wearing a Class P1 or P2 facemask and disposable overalls and removing the underlay carefully to minimise dust.

This will provide protection against inhaling dust and other allergens as well as any asbestos fibres, in the unlikely event that they are present. Alternatively residents should engage a professional carpet layer to remove and replace their carpet.

The Environmental Health Hazards Unit can also provide further information on safe work practices for removing carpet underlay.



Please contact the Department of Health's Environmental Health Hazards Unit on 9388 4999 if you have any further enquiries or concerns or to determine whether it would be appropriate to have a sample of your underlay tested.