

Devil in disguise: the health hazard that's hidden in the fabric of millions of homes

If your property was built before 1999 it may well harbour asbestos, writes Andrew Don

Your home has a 50% chance of harbouring asbestos, which could be lethal if disturbed.

The use of asbestos has been common in the industrialised world since the mid-19th century and it was not until 1999 that a total ban was imposed. Lee Carter, principal director of the consultants WSP Environment & Energy, says that it has been widely used in residential property: "Among private homes, more than 50% are likely to include some asbestos-containing materials."

While this may sound alarming, asbestos is likely to be dangerous only if it is released into the air and you breathe it in. Then you could be at long-term risk of developing lung cancer, asbestosis or mesothelioma (a cancer that forms in the lining of the chest or abdomen). Experts say that there should be little or no risk if the asbestos is enclosed and left undisturbed but it must be regularly checked for signs of deterioration.

But accidents happen and the previously dormant devil within could be released when "improvement" work is being carried out, for example, or when a burst pipe causes damage to ceilings.

This is what happened to Brian Fitzpatrick, 49, from South Darenth, Kent, who endured the Christmas from hell when he discovered water damage in his house on 22 December. Pipes had burst in the loft and contractors alerted him to the threat of asbestos in the Artex coating on his ceilings. Before the sample results came back, one of the ceilings collapsed and the industrial dryer blew asbestos around



A protest about African victims ... but few realise the danger in their own homes.

the house. Fitzpatrick and his family have had to relocate while repairs and decontamination take place.

Although the results of sampling tests indicated a low number of asbestos particles in the air, the family remain concerned for the future. Fitzpatrick, a partner at the building consultancy EC Harris, said: "It's a nightmare. No one expected asbestos. Emotionally, the experience has been traumatic for all the family but especially for my wife and daughter."

Fitzpatrick says that his insurer is picking up the £10,000 cost of replacing all 13 ceilings, as well as the cost of air-quality and material sampling tests, and is paying up to £30,000 for the family's emergency accommodation. The soft furnishings in the house will have to be disposed of under controlled conditions.

But the Association of British Insurers points out that policies will cover removal of asbestos only as part of a householder's damage claim, and not simply because asbestos happens to have been identified.

In older homes, asbestos is often present in ceilings decorated using

Artex textured coating. This is because, until the mid-1980s, Artex was made with white asbestos to strengthen it. However, Joe Oakins, a surveyor at Vintec Environmental Management, says: "We find asbestos products used in the strangest places. Often builders used whatever they had lying around, so you often find off-cuts of asbestos boards used as packing and filler."

Peter Coling, technical director at Kinleigh Folkard & Hayward Chartered Surveyors, estimates that 30% of asbestos is found in ceiling coatings, 15% in boiler flue pipes and ducts, and 15% in floor tiles. A further 15% is found in areas such as cold water storage tanks, insulation materials, eaves, gutters and rainwater pipes, while 10% is in cement panel ceilings, 10% in outbuildings and 5% in fire protection materials, for example on the underside of integral garage roofs and in cupboards enclosing boilers.

Phil Wright, chief engineer at the inspection and insurance service Allianz Engineering, says: "It is difficult to establish how much asbestos is present in a home without employing a specialist to undertake a full inspection." Samples need to be taken for analysis at a laboratory approved by the United Kingdom Accreditation Service.

Debbie Hales, director of Asbestos First, one of 450 licensed removal firms in the UK, says: "With textured coatings you have to take [samples] from different locations. It can be free of asbestos in one part and not in the next because of the way it was manufactured."

Hales says that the cost of a sampling visit should be about £150 plus VAT. If any additional samples are required during the visit, expect to pay about £20 plus VAT per sample. To remove an area of textured coating, such as Artex, containing asbestos costs about £1,200 plus VAT for up to 20sq m, including disposal and air-quality tests.