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What is asbestos?

Asbestos is a material that was widely used in the construction of houses in Australia until 1982. In 1982 the use of asbestos in building materials was banned by government because of its risks to human health.

If a home was built after 1982, then it is extremely unlikely that any asbestos is present. Asbestos was used because it was believed to be fire and water resistant and able to make walls stronger when mixed with cement. As a result, in homes built before 1982 asbestos can be present in walls, ceilings, pipe insulation, roof tiles, kitchens, bathrooms and laundries. About one-third of all houses in Australia contain asbestos. Therefore some houses owned or leased by Affordable Community Housing may contain materials with asbestos.

When is asbestos dangerous?

Materials containing asbestos are completely safe when undamaged. For example a wall, pipe or ceiling that contains asbestos is not a danger to your health if they are not broken, cracked or damaged.

Materials containing asbestos are a danger to health if they are damaged or broken because the damage increases the risk of asbestos fibres being released into the air.

Asbestos fibres can pose a serious risk to health because breathing them in is the main way that asbestos enters the body. The presence of asbestos in the human body has been linked to a number of lung diseases including lung cancer.

The level of risk that breathing in asbestos fibres can pose to health depends on:

- How long someone has been inhaling asbestos fibres;
- The amount of asbestos fibres in the air to which someone is/was exposed;

and

- The size of the asbestos fibres in the air to which someone was exposed.

What are we doing about it?

As a first step we asked professional experts to help us assess the presence of asbestos in the older homes that we own and lease to our tenants. They examined a sample cross section of our properties that were built before 1982 and confirmed that materials with asbestos were present in some of them.

Based on this information our second step is the inspection of all of the properties we own that were built before 1982. This means that more homes will be inspected to identify the presence of materials with asbestos. One of our Housing Manager will contact tenants about these inspections and it is important that our tenants cooperate fully with this inspection. Based on the results of this full inspection our third step we will be either:

- The urgent professional treatment or removal of materials with asbestos in the home where asbestos poses a risk to health (this will mainly be where materials with asbestos are damaged);

or

- Confirmation that the home contains materials with asbestos but that because of their good condition there is no immediate risk to health; or
- Confirmation that the home does not contain materials with asbestos.
- Conduct regular inspections and an annual safety audit;
- Ensure that any material with asbestos that is damaged in the future and poses a risk to our tenants is treated or removed urgently by professional experts;

What is asbestos?

For all our properties where the full inspections resulted in materials with asbestos being treated (but not removed) or confirmation that materials with asbestos were not an immediate risk (because they were undamaged) we will:

- Respond urgently to any damage of materials reported to us by our tenants between our regular inspections.
- Advise contractors/tradespeople working on these properties about the presence of asbestos and the safety precautions they must take to protect themselves and our tenants.

What must tenants do to help us?

We ask that our tenants do some very simple things and these are the sort of things that we ask of all tenants.

- Do not damage walls, ceilings, pipes or other materials in the home. This includes hammering nails or hooks into walls.
- Always immediately report any damage to one of our Housing Managers.
- Do not attempt to repair pipes or facilities in kitchens, bathrooms, laundries, walls, ceilings or other areas.
- Always request one of our Housing Managers to organise any repairs that are needed at the home.
- Pay ongoing attention to any signs of damage to materials in the home and report these immediately to our office.

This includes:

- Obvious damage such as cracked or broken wall panels;
- Untreated or unpainted wall and ceiling surfaces;
- Holes in the walls, through picture nails or through damage from door handles.

Tenants should pay special attention to signs of damage in the surfaces in the "wet areas" of your home, such as the kitchen, bathroom or laundry.

Can tenants be rehoused in a property that does not contain asbestos?

Any of our tenants can apply to be rehoused at any time and we judge each case on its merits.

However, if we believe that the property is completely safe for the tenant and the presence of asbestos is the only reason for wanting to move, then the application for rehousing is not likely to be successful.

Where can tenants get further information about asbestos?

We are providing this fact sheet in various languages spoken by our tenants.

Tenants can contact their Housing Manager at our office on 9790 3093 for further information at any time.

The NSW Department of Health can provide further information on 9828 5944, or the situation can be