



# Asbestos in Carpet Underlay

The Department of Health continues its investigation into the possibility of asbestos in some types of old carpet underlay

## BACKGROUND TO THE ISSUE

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 up until the early 1970s. The concern being that such underlay could 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 originating from the Asbestos Diseases Society. The concerns were based on statements and interviews of former employees who had worked in the hessian bag recycling industry or transporting of asbestos from Wittenoom to Perth and had contracted an asbestos related disease.

In response to the original concerns in 2006, the Department of Health's (DOH) Environmental Health Directorate (EHD) had several samples of carpet underlay tested to try and obtain actual evidence of asbestos fibres in underlay of homes. The intention was to obtain samples of underlay that had been installed before 1970, but ideally, 'original' underlay. Although only a relatively small number of samples were able to be obtained, all were found to be free of asbestos.

Several samples collected independently by the Asbestos Diseases Society were also found to be free of any asbestos.

Based on the 2006 results, DOH advised the public that the likelihood of asbestos being in carpet underlay was low but precautions should still be taken when removing old carpet in the unlikely event there was any asbestos fibres present.

## RESULTS OF RECENT INVESTIGATIONS

The EHD recently extended its request to the public for samples of old carpet underlay so it could provide more informed advice on potential risks from carpet underlay.

Over the past two months, samples of underlay have been collected from a further 12 Perth homes. Eleven of these were found to have no asbestos, but small quantities of asbestos fibres were detected in underlay from a 1950's home that had original carpet and underlay.

Results of further testing of the underlay, carpet and dust from rooms of the home in which the affected underlay was situated revealed that the asbestos fibres were confined to the underlay and unlikely to have been released into the air where they would pose a health risk.

## IS THERE A NEED TO BE CONCERNED?

Our current findings (based on samples collected from a total of 23 homes) indicate that the likelihood of asbestos fibres being present in carpet underlay is very low. Furthermore, it is very unlikely that any asbestos fibres that may be present would be released and become airborne whilst the carpet and underlay remain intact.





However, precautions should always be taken when disturbing or removing old carpet and underlay as considerable dust and particulates are released during that process. (See section '*Precautions to take when removing old carpet*'). Following these precautions should also provide a safeguard in the unlikely event there are asbestos fibres present.

Also see Section '*What am I required to do in the event of positive sample result?*'

### **SOME FACTS ABOUT THE HESSIAN BAG RECYCLING INDUSTRY**

The EHD has ascertained that up until the early 1970s, a significant quantity of hessian bags used to transport asbestos, wool, superphosphate and produce were recycled with other material such as jute and goat hair, to manufacture carpet hair felt underlay. It is possible that some of the bags were imported from other countries.

Former employees of the bag recycling industry have stated that many of the bags still in good condition were not recycled but cleaned, repaired, then sold to various industries for re-use. Only those bags that were not repairable were recycled.

It is understood the bag recycling process involved mechanical shredding, vibration and cleaning of material. Therefore it is likely that most asbestos fibres would have been removed during this process. Persons most at risk would have been those working in that environment.

### **FURTHER REQUEST FOR SAMPLE TESTING**

The EHD wants to define the level of risk that this issue poses to public health more accurately by testing more samples from old homes that may still have original carpet and underlay installed prior to the early 1970s.

Therefore DOH invites anyone with 'original' carpet underlay (installed prior to the early 1970s) who is considering replacing their carpet to contact the EHD on 9388 4999 to discuss whether their carpet underlay is of the type and age that may have included asbestos-contaminated hessian material. An image showing an example of hair felt underlay is shown on the last page of this fact sheet.

We are particularly interested in obtaining a sample of underlay from older homes that may still have original carpet and underlay.

### **PRECAUTIONS TO TAKE WHEN REMOVING OLD CARPET**

Although it is unlikely underlay will contain asbestos fibres, the EHD is advising householders to take standard precautions when removing old carpet and underlay. The standard safety precautions are to wear a Class P1 or P2 facemask and disposable overalls.

Care should be taken to minimise the release of dust by carefully rolling up carpet and underlay and where possible, lightly wetting down the material prior to and during the removal process.

Following these procedures should provide protection against inhaling dust and other allergens as well as any asbestos fibres that may be present. Alternatively, residents should engage a professional carpet layer to remove and replace their carpet.





### **WHAT AM I REQUIRED TO DO IN THE EVENT OF A POSITIVE SAMPLE RESULT?**

If a positive sample result for asbestos in underlay is obtained, an officer from the EHD will contact the resident/owner to discuss what further actions/measures may need to be taken. However our findings to date indicate that whilst the carpet and underlay is left in situ, it should pose no risk to health.

If the resident/owner wishes to remove the carpet and underlay it is important to follow the precautions (see pervious page) and ensure that once removed, the carpet and underlay is wrapped and sealed in plastic sheeting, bundles are labelled with the words - CAUTION ASBESTOS then taken to a waste facility that accepts asbestos. For advice on location of waste facilities, residents can contact their local government or refer to the following website:

<http://www.dec.wa.gov.au/content/view/2875/1687>

The preferred option is for the resident to engage a licensed asbestos removalist to carry out the work. Asbestos removalists can be found searching the business yellow pages under 'A' or accessing the following Department of Commerce website:

[http://www.commerce.wa.gov.au/WorkSafe/PDF/Directories/Licenced\\_asbestos\\_re.pdf](http://www.commerce.wa.gov.au/WorkSafe/PDF/Directories/Licenced_asbestos_re.pdf)



*A picture of typical hair felt underlay.*

Please contact the EHD's Environmental Health Hazards Unit on 9388 4999 if you have any further queries or concerns or want to discuss testing a sample of underlay from your home.

*Revised December 2009*

