Asbestos in the ceiling: Am I in danger? [1]

Dear Alice,

I just rented an apartment and before I signed the lease, I was told that there was a small amount of asbestos found in the ceiling texture. I was told that it is covered in paint and should not cause any harm unless I were to drill holes. I guess my question is: How much asbestos is "safe" and is this something to be concerned about?

Answer

Dear Reader,

You bring up a great question, particularly since there?s been a lot of discussion and concern about asbestos exposure and the associated health risks since the late 1970s. While there is indeed risk involved with exposure to the substance; typically those who become ill have had regular and significant exposure over time, say for instance, in a job setting or in a living environment. That being said, just because there?s asbestos in your apartment?s ceiling, it doesn?t mean you have to re-pack your moving van and high-tail it out of there. The advice you were given about forgoing any drilling or obstruction to the ceiling seems to be in line with expert advice. Keep reading for more on asbestos in general and how to move forward now that you?ve moved in.

A bit of background on asbestos: Mining and industrial use of this naturally occurring material began in the 1800s. It was considered a versatile industrial material with many uses, including insulation, fire-protection, soundproofing, and strengthening other materials. This is because the material is resistant to heat, fire, and chemicals as well as not being conductive to electricity. Because of the these qualities, asbestos was commonly used in ceilings, roofs, walls, floor coverings, clutches and brakes in cars, and heat-resistant fabrics.

Your worry about exposure isn?t without merit. As early as 1897, health care providers have linked asbestos to pulmonary troubles. Through further investigation throughout the years, they discovered that when asbestos fibers are inhaled, they get caught in the lungs and remain there for an extended period of time. During that time, the fibers cause inflammation and scarring. Studies have shown that when folks get enough exposure to asbestos fibers, it may result in breathing difficulties and some serious health issues, including:

- Asbestosis ? a chronic, non-cancerous scarring of the lungs
- Lung cancer
- Mesothelioma ? a rare cancer that affects the lining of the chest, heart, lungs, and
Some amount of regulation began to prohibit the use of asbestos in the 1970s because of these noted health risks and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) prohibited the use of it in any new products in 1989. Despite the ban, though, uses that were developed prior to 1989 are still allowed and there are still places and products in which the use of asbestos is not banned [2].

So, what increases a person’s health risk? The more asbestos fibers a person inhales, the greater her/his chances of developing one of the associated conditions. Smoking also increases the chances of having an asbestos-related illness if the smoker is or has been in contact with this material. For people who have inhaled enough asbestos to cause one of these diseases, symptoms tend to appear 10 to 40 years after the first exposure. All this to say, how much a person is exposed to, over what period of time, the source and type of asbestos involved in the exposure, and other personal health risk factors all play into the likelihood that a person will become ill. It’s good to note that most people who are exposed to small amounts, as many are in their everyday lives, won’t experience any problems. Asbestos can be harmful when people inhale loose fibers. If loose fibers stay out of the air, you've got little to worry about.

Asbestos-containing material (ACM) generally will not shed fiber unless it’s damaged or disturbed. As you were advised, avoid drilling, cutting, sanding, hitting, rubbing, or otherwise handling the ACM in your ceiling. To address this further, you can talk with your landlord or superintendent again to find out more details about the ACM in your apartment? is it sealed in by the paint? Does the paint itself contain asbestos? Has a professional contractor been in recently to assess the situation? Also, it’s wise to inspect your ceiling regularly for cracks, holes, flaking, water-erosion, crumbling, or other damage that could expose you to loose asbestos fibers.

If there appears to be damage, talk with your landlord or a professional contractor who is experienced in asbestos removal? don’t try to remove the material yourself, as you might end up releasing more fibers into the air. To learn more about asbestos and how to reduce exposure, the National Cancer Institute [3] and the EPA [4] are great resources. If your ceiling appears to be undamaged and in good condition, continue to keep a watchful eye out, but otherwise, try to relax and enjoy your new apartment!

Alice!
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