

## **LOOSE ASBESTOS INSULATION IN THE ACT**

From 1968 to 1979, pure loose-fill asbestos was sold predominantly by one local company ('Mr Fluffy') as ceiling insulation for residential and commercial premises in Canberra. This insulation is particularly problematical because it is raw asbestos. In effect, it is mined asbestos (which is fibrous by nature) that has been crushed into a fine state and installed as insulation. This means it is easy to disturb and fibres can become airborne and easily inhaled or ingested.

While there is evidence to suggest that this form of insulation was used in other Australian jurisdictions (and parts of the world), the extent of its use as a form of residential home insulation in the ACT, and the subsequent removal program, is considered unique.

### **Loose Asbestos Insulation Removal Program 1988–1993**

In 1988, the Commonwealth Government (as then Government for the Territory) commenced a survey of all Canberra houses built before 1980. This date was selected as evidence indicated Mr Fluffy ceased trading in around 1978/79.

Later that year, the Commonwealth Government announced a program to remove the loose-fill asbestos insulation from Canberra houses at public expense. The Government initiated the removal program in the interest of public health. The ongoing responsibility for the removal program was transferred to the ACT Government with self government in 1989.

The Loose Asbestos Insulation Removal Program had three phases:

- The first phase of the Program involved surveying homes to identify which may contain loose asbestos insulation. Approximately 65,000 houses built before 1980 were surveyed through a visual assessment.
- The second phase of the Program involved the sealing of ceilings at all points where it was considered that asbestos could enter into living areas. Once homes were sealed they were deemed safe to live in.
- The third phase of the Program was the removal of loose asbestos from the ceiling cavity, under the house and accessible wall cavities. The removal was undertaken according to standards at the time and included air monitoring to determine whether houses were suitable to be reoccupied.

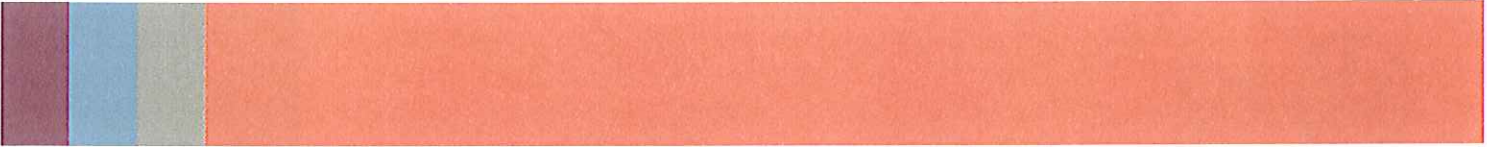
Records indicate that asbestos insulation was removed from over 1,000 houses within the ACT.

### **Limitations of the program**

There are a number of reasons why the Loose Asbestos Insulation Removal Program is unlikely to have removed all the loose-fill asbestos insulation in all ACT homes.

- The survey to identify houses that may have contained loose-fill asbestos insulation involved a visual inspection, with samples only being taken if necessary. This was considered a reasonable methodology at the time, although it clearly had some limitations. As a result, the Commonwealth provided an express disclaimer that while all care was taken in the inspection, the Commonwealth could not give an undertaking that the survey would identify every building with asbestos.



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- The removal phase involved removing loose asbestos from the ceiling cavity, under the house and accessible wall cavities. However, it was accepted, that because of the nature of the task and the material itself it is likely that some asbestos insulation will still be present in the house, including in places such as internal and external wall cavities, subfloor spaces and underneath cornices.
  - The inside roof and accessible wall cavities were sealed with a PVA spray designed to encapsulate any remaining asbestos fibres to minimise the risk posed. There is some evidence to suggest that over time this may deteriorate, allowing some fibres to escape.


At the time, home owners were provided with information outlining additional obligations placed on them in terms of maintenance and renovation work on their house. Owners were made aware that asbestos fibres remain in inaccessible areas of the home, in particular wall cavities and appropriate precautions must be exercised when undertaking tasks such as replacing power-points, removing wall heaters and disturbing walls.

In 2005 a letter was sent to all home owners/occupiers where records indicated that loose-fill asbestos insulation had been removed as part of the removal program. The letter reminded home owners to take appropriate steps with any future additions and alterations, due to the possibility of residual asbestos material.

If you are concerned about the possibility of loose-fill asbestos insulation in your home or a home you are interested in purchasing it is recommended that you engage the services of a licensed Asbestos Assessor and ask them to look specifically for evidence that the home has this form of insulation in it or has had loose-fill asbestos insulation removed. An Assessor can provide you with specialist advice on the presence of this material and the steps required should you undertake any erection, alteration or demolition works. A list of licensed Asbestos Assessors is available on the Environment and Sustainable Development Directorate website at the following web address [www.actpla.act.gov.au](http://www.actpla.act.gov.au) .

For additional fact sheets about the three phases of the Loose Asbestos Insulation Removal Program and how to find out if your house has had loose-fill asbestos insulation removed during the Program visit the Asbestos website at [www.asbestos.act.gov.au](http://www.asbestos.act.gov.au) .

Home owners should also be aware that homes built before 1985 will likely have asbestos containing materials in them. More information about this form of asbestos is available in the fact sheet "Important Asbestos Advice for ACT homes built before 1985."





## **THE THREE PHASES OF THE LOOSE ASBESTOS INSULATION REMOVAL PROGRAM**

In 1988 the Commonwealth Government commenced a Loose Asbestos Insulation Removal Program in the ACT. The Commonwealth Government initiated this program in the interest of public health because of the health risks posed by this form of asbestos. (The ongoing responsibility for the Loose Asbestos Insulation Removal Program was transferred to the ACT Government with self government in 1989.)

This Program aimed to remove visible and accessible asbestos insulation. It was not designed to remove all of the asbestos insulation. It is likely that some asbestos insulation will still be present in these homes, including in places such as internal and external wall cavities, subfloor spaces and underneath cornices.

The Loose Asbestos Insulation Removal Program had three phases:

- Survey
- Sealing
- Removal

### **Survey**

The purpose of the survey was to identify homes containing loose asbestos insulation. Around 65,000 houses built before 1980 were surveyed.

The survey involved visual assessment only. Inspectors would lift tiles in perimeter locations of roofs and determine whether the ceiling space insulation contained asbestos. A sample for analysis was not always taken. Samples were only collected if the inspector assessed it as necessary.

### **What was the nature and extent of the survey?**

Participation in the survey was mandatory for all home owners and occupiers and legislative provisions were enacted to provide inspectors with appropriate powers to undertake the survey, including in the absence of consent of the home owner.

The assessment of the age of a home was based on the ACT Rates notices. Of significance, in undertaking the survey, the Government did not provide an absolute assurance to home owners that their property did not contain asbestos insulation. In fact, the survey was undertaken with an express disclaimer that was provided to the owner/occupier of every home surveyed:

“While all care was taken in the inspection, the Commonwealth cannot give an undertaking that there is no loose asbestos insulation in any quantity in any dwelling.”


### **Sealing**

This process involved the sealing of ceilings at all points where entry of asbestos into living areas could occur (cornices, architraves, around vents, around light fittings, manholes and tops of cupboards).

Once the affected homes were sealed they were deemed safe to live in.

### **Removal**

The program followed the standards detailed in the 1988 National Occupational Health and Safety Commission (NOHSC) Asbestos – Code of Practice which are generally reflected in current regulations and codes of practice. As well as the actual extraction of asbestos from houses, removal technology provided for worker safety, barrier containment, and negative-pressure air systems




and associated equipment. Quality assurance covered methods of measurement and laboratory techniques appropriate for examining air samples to identify asbestos fibre levels. The program followed the standards detailed in the 1988 NOHSC Asbestos - Code of Practice which are generally reflected in current regulations and codes of practice.

Air monitoring was undertaken during the removal process and again, following the completion of the asbestos removal to certify that the works had been undertaken in accordance with the 1988 NOHSC Asbestos - Code of Practice and that the house was suitable to be reoccupied.

For additional fact sheets about Loose Asbestos Insulation in the ACT (including the limitations of the Program) and how to find out if your house had loose-fill asbestos insulation removed during the Program visit the Asbestos website at [www.asbestos.act.gov.au](http://www.asbestos.act.gov.au).

Home owners should also be aware that homes built before 1985 will likely have asbestos containing materials in them. More information about this form of asbestos is available in the fact sheet "Important Asbestos Advice for ACT homes built before 1985."





## **HOW DO I KNOW IF MY HOUSE HAD LOOSE-FILL ASBESTOS INSULATION REMOVED?**

In 1988 the Commonwealth Government commenced a Loose Asbestos Insulation Removal Program in the ACT. The Commonwealth Government initiated this program in the interest of public health because of the health risks posed by this form of asbestos. (The ongoing responsibility for the Loose Asbestos Insulation Removal Program was transferred to the ACT Government with self government in 1989.)

This Program aimed to remove visible and accessible asbestos insulation. It was not designed to remove all of the asbestos insulation. It is likely that some asbestos insulation will still be present in these homes, including in places such as internal and external wall cavities, subfloor spaces and underneath cornices. The ACT Government has therefore implemented a number of measures to provide owners and residents of these properties with information on the possible presence loose-fill asbestos which may remain in the home and the need to take precautions when undertaking activities such as maintenance, alteration (renovation and extension) or demolition which may liberate these fibres.

### **Advice provided to home owners/occupiers of houses that were part of the program**

- During the removal program home owners where loose-fill asbestos insulation was removed were provided with information outlining additional obligations placed on them in terms of maintenance and renovation work on their house. Owners were made aware that asbestos fibres remain in inaccessible areas of the home, in particular wall cavities and appropriate precautions must be exercised when undertaking tasks such as replacing power points, removing wall heaters and disturbing walls.
- In 2005 a letter was sent to all home owners/occupiers where records indicated that loose-fill asbestos insulation had been removed as part of the Removal Program. The letter reminded home owners to take appropriate steps with any future additions and alterations, due to the possibility of residual asbestos material in wall cavities and the like.

### **Lease Conveyance Report**

Since 2004 a contract for sale of a residential property must also include a lease conveyance report obtained from the Environment and Sustainable Development Directorate (ESDD). If the property is recorded as having loose-fill asbestos insulation removed as part of the Loose Asbestos Insulation Removal Program the lease conveyance inquiry report indicates that a form of asbestos is or has been present on the land.

The ACT Government is not able to guarantee the accuracy of information about the status of individual houses and it is important to be aware that:

- sheds and garages were not surveyed during the Program;
- it is possible not all houses were surveyed;
- it is possible that asbestos insulation may have been present but was not detected in the ceiling of some of the surveyed houses.

Potential purchasers should not rely on the accuracy of information about the status of individual houses and should make their own enquiries and obtain their own reports (by a licensed Asbestos Assessor) in relation to the presence or otherwise of loose-fill asbestos insulation (and other forms of asbestos) on the premises.





## Building File Information

The Building File for a house will generally indicate whether the house had asbestos removed during the Loose Asbestos Insulation Removal Program. To view the building file you must complete a building file search form. Under Part 3 of the form "Description of Service" there is space to request specified documents/additional information and you can request any documents/information regarding whether the property was surveyed and/or had asbestos insulation removed as part of the Loose Asbestos Insulation Removal Program.

If you are not the owner you will need a letter of authority from the owner or the owner's solicitor giving permission to access the file. You can apply by phone on (02) 6207 1923, in person at the ACTPLA Mitchell Shopfront or online through the ESSD website at [www.actpla.act.gov.au/publications\\_forms/forms](http://www.actpla.act.gov.au/publications_forms/forms).

## General laws requiring disclosure about asbestos in homes

There are also laws that require:

- the disclosure of Asbestos Assessment Reports (where these have been undertaken); and
- the provision of general advice about the possibility of asbestos in homes at certain transaction points (eg in the contract for the sale of a home).

## Does a building report prepared for a house sale provide any information relating to asbestos?

A building report does not provide this information. Generally reports exempt all consideration of asbestos. Only licensed asbestos assessors are permitted to provide advice on the presence of asbestos or asbestos materials. However historical information in the building file used to compile the report may indicate that the property was subject to asbestos removal as part of the removal program and this may be noted in the Building Report.

## What should I do?

If you are concerned about the possibility of loose-fill asbestos insulation in your home or a home you are interested in purchasing it is recommended that you engage the services of a licensed Asbestos Assessor and ask them to look specifically for evidence that the home has this form of insulation in it or has had loose-fill asbestos insulation removed. An Assessor can provide you with specialist advice on the presence of this material and the steps required should you undertake any erection, alteration or demolition works. A list of licensed Asbestos Assessors is available on the Environment and Sustainable Development Directorate website at the following web address [www.actpla.act.gov.au](http://www.actpla.act.gov.au).

For additional fact sheets about Loose Asbestos Insulation in the ACT (including the limitations of the Program) visit the Asbestos website at [www.asbestos.act.gov.au](http://www.asbestos.act.gov.au). Information about ACT laws requiring the disclosure of asbestos in ACT homes can be found through the link below.

[www.asbestos.act.gov.au/page/view/2391](http://www.asbestos.act.gov.au/page/view/2391)

Home owners should also be aware that homes built before 1985 will likely have asbestos containing materials in them. More information about this form of asbestos is available in the fact sheet "Important Asbestos Advice for ACT homes built before 1985."

