

Asbestos in the Attic?

Recent news stories have revealed that some attic insulation could contain asbestos. The insulation, manufactured by W.R. Grace from 1963 to 1984 under the brand name Zonolite, comes from an asbestos-contaminated ore called vermiculite. This vermiculite was mined in Montana and processed into Zonolite at various locations around the country, including one plant in Wilder, Kentucky. The United States Environmental Protection Agency (U.S. EPA) has estimated that Zonolite attic insulation was installed in about 940,000 American homes.

What is asbestos and why is it a problem?

Asbestos is a naturally occurring mineral that has been used in thousands of products, including insulation, for its fire-retardant, insulating, and material-strengthening properties. When asbestos-containing materials are disturbed, they can release asbestos fibers into the air we breathe. Breathing asbestos fibers can cause lung diseases such as asbestosis, lung cancer, and mesothelioma.

What does it look like?

Vermiculite insulation is a pebble-like, pour-in product that is usually light brown or gold in color, as shown in the photographs below.



How do I know if it contains asbestos?

It's safest to hire a trained professional to sample and analyze the material. However, if you want to sample the material yourself, you should wear a HEPA-filtered dust mask (usually available at safety-supply stores and some hardware stores), moisten the insulation but disturb it as little as possible, and scoop about one tablespoon of it into a sealable plastic sandwich bag. The laboratory you use to analyze the sample should be accredited to analyze asbestos samples. To find an accredited laboratory, either look in the Yellow Pages under "asbestos testing," "environmental services," or "laboratories," or visit the web site www.ts.nist.gov for a Directory of Accredited Laboratories. Before sampling the material, you should call your laboratory for sampling and packaging instructions.

What should I do if it does contain asbestos?

Do not disturb it. Limiting the number of trips you make to the attic and shortening the length of those trips can help limit your potential exposure. If you must spend considerable time in your attic, or if you plan to remodel or renovate in your attic, you should hire certified asbestos professionals to remove the insulation safely -- do not try to remove it yourself. If you think you have already been exposed to asbestos, you might consider consulting a physician who specializes in lung diseases (pulmonologist) and getting a chest X-ray read by a specialist known as a "certified B-reader." If you think the living space of your home might be contaminated from prior disturbances to the attic insulation, you might consider having a professional asbestos consultant take some air samples in your home and provide remediation advice if the tests show contamination.

Where can I find more information on asbestos-containing vermiculite insulation?

Visit U.S. EPA's asbestos web site at www.epa.gov/opptintr/asbestos or the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry's web site at www.atsdr.cdc.gov, or call Eric Eisiminger at the Division for Air Quality at 502-564-3999.