

Hazards in roof cavities

Information for householders

Dust, ash and other materials can collect in roof cavities. The Department of Health and Human Services has prepared the following information to provide you with the facts about these hazards and steps you can take to protect your health and the health of those in your care.

What hazards may exist in your roof cavity?

The space between your ceiling and the external roof is referred to as a roof cavity. This space may contain various materials including fibreglass fibres, building materials containing asbestos, lead dust from pollution, droppings from animals, fungal spores, pesticides or general household dust.

Natural events and industrial activities in your local area may affect the amount and types of materials that can accumulate in your roof cavity. In certain parts of Victoria, dust from local industry and/or ash from fires may enter your roof cavity. This may include ash from personal heating fires, planned burns, bushfires, coal mine fires (for example the Hazelwood coal mine fire), or industrial fires.

Could hazards in my roof cavity pose a risk to my health or safety?

Hazards in roof cavities that are not disturbed and can be isolated from residents do not pose a health risk.

However householders may be putting themselves at risk when entering a roof cavity and doing work. There are risks of physical injury (for example falls and electrocution) and potential risks from skin contact or breathing in various materials. It is important to be aware of any risks and the steps you can take to keep safe.

What can I do to protect myself and my family?

The best course of action is to not disturb any dust or other materials in your roof cavity.

If you must enter your roof cavity or renovate your home, follow these steps to protect yourself and your family:

Before going into a roof cavity

- turn the electricity off
- use a torch to identify possible hazards
- beware of high temperatures (possible risk of heat exhaustion)
- think about the type and location of insulation materials, electrical wiring and water or gas piping.

Many homes built before the 1990s contain asbestos cement materials particularly in eaves, ceilings, man-hole covers or asbestos heater flues.

Make sure you know the safe handling procedures if there is any possibility of handling asbestos-containing materials.

Visit www.asbestos.vic.gov.au or the Better Health Channel at <https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/public-health/environmental-health/environmental-health-in-the-home/asbestos-in-the-home>.

While working in a roof cavity

- wear appropriate safety equipment such as:
 - a P1 or P2 face mask that meets Australian Standard AS/NZS 1716. These are available from local hardware stores
 - appropriate gloves and footwear
 - long-sleeved, loose-fitting clothes.
- keep the work area clear of waste and dust, and place waste in thick plastic bags.
- take care when accessing and walking across the work area to avoid tripping over debris, roof trusses, or ceiling materials.
- make sure you don't come in contact with, or damage, any electrical cables or equipment. **If any electrical cable or equipment is damaged, stop work and engage a licensed electrical contractor.**

- contact your local council for advice about additional protection that may be required if you have an asbestos cement roof or concerns that asbestos building materials in the roof cavity are in poor condition.
- do not use a household vacuum cleaner in roof spaces. They can release dust that may contain hazardous materials into the air.
- advise contractors doing work in roof spaces of any known hazards.

After going into a roof cavity

- dispose of debris, waste and disposable safety equipment appropriately (seek advice from local council)
- shower and wash any non-disposable clothing separately.

What if I live close to the Hazelwood coal mine?

If you live close to the Hazelwood Coal Mine your home may contain coal ash from the fire.

Coal ash is a fine powdery material produced as a by-product when coal is burned. Ash is visible to the eye, and ash particles are larger than the fine particles associated with smoke.

If you are exposed to ash, practice good hygiene. Wash ash off your body as needed, and follow the same general advice when working in roof cavities.

Further information

If you have been exposed to materials in your roof cavity and are concerned about your health, see your doctor or call NURSE-ON-CALL on 1300 60 60 24.

Department of Health and Human Services

For more information on the potential health effects from exposure to hazards in roof cavities call 1300 761 874 during business hours.

To receive this publication in an accessible format phone 1300 761 874, using the National Relay Service 13 36 77 if required, or email environmental.healthunit@dhhs.vic.gov.au

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