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Australia's ageing asbestos legacy – making ageing asbestos in buildings less dangerous in the short term

Practices to make asbestos less dangerous where it is not immediately possible to remove it have been examined by the Asbestos Safety and Eradication Agency in a new report that looks at current ways of containing and stabilising asbestos, particularly in roofing.

The Agency has examined current products and practices used to contain and stabilise asbestos in order to make it safer to remain in place, or to help make it safer while it's being removed.

The study found support in the industry for a government incentive towards dealing with and managing asbestos.

In bonded form, building materials that contain asbestos are relatively stable, but they pose a risk to human health and the environment as they age. Exposure to the elements and disturbance increases the likelihood of asbestos fibres becoming airborne.

"As Australia grapples with the legacy of in-situ asbestos in our built environment, we need many solutions," ASEA CEO Peter Tighe said.

"A lot of asbestos has been removed from Australian buildings, but there's a long way to go.

"In an ideal world, we would have all the resources we need to remove asbestos completely from all buildings. But in the short term, methods like encapsulation are vastly preferable to doing nothing."

Asbestos roofing is a particular problem, both in commercial and residential buildings. Asbestos roofing is prevalent in Australia, and its exposure to the elements means it is more likely to deteriorate over time than other uses of asbestos.

Encapsulation of asbestos on roofing is essential and a simple and cost effective way to make deteriorating asbestos safer whilst waiting for removal as the only permanent solution.

(Encapsulation is the process of covering a material containing asbestos in a penetrative compound to contain the fibres).

Under a National Strategic Plan for Asbestos Management and Awareness, the Agency has a focus on improving stabilisation and containment practices for asbestos containing materials in poor condition.

<https://www.asbestossafety.gov.au/research-publications/review-asbestos-stabilisation-and-containment-practices-final-report>