

Public Health England FAQs on fires involving Asbestos Containing Material

What are the health risks associated with asbestos containing material?

During the fire visible fragments of Asbestos Containing Material were carried in the smoke plume and may have been deposited on nearby properties, gardens and streets. As the majority of asbestos fibres are held tightly within the asbestos containing material they are not released into the air and this minimises the health risk. If this material however is handled, crumbles or is broken up and there is a chance that fibres are released in the air. It is only breathing in asbestos fibres that present a health risk. For this reason it is best not to handle the fragments yourself in case they break up in the process, but to leave this to specialists.

I have debris from the fire on my property, what should I do?

If you find ash and debris from the fire on your property you are advised to leave it alone and to contact City of Wolverhampton Council on 01902 551155 so that clean-up can be arranged. Offices are open from 8am to 6pm Monday to Friday. If there is evidence of debris in the garden you should avoid disturbing the material, for example do not mow the lawn until it has been cleared up and removed. You may also find that you have an amount of dust and soot on your property which is unlikely to contain any asbestos. The council are not intending to clean this and you are advised to wash surfaces in the normal way using plenty of soap and water.

I need to clean away debris and dust urgently, for example to use my car, what should I do?

If it is absolutely necessary for residents to move or remove debris themselves (e.g. from a car windscreen) they should first gently damp down the debris using water and use a dampened cloth to wipe away debris. Wearing protective gloves, pick up larger pieces carefully. Place all debris, used dampened cloths and larger pieces within two plastic bags (one within the other, i.e. double bagged), seal all bags and **call City of Wolverhampton Council on 01902 551155 to arrange collection**. Do not sweep up or vacuum debris as this could create airborne dust.

If there is no risk from the debris, why do the clean-up teams wear full protective clothing?

The clean-up operation will be done by specially trained cleaning contractors working on behalf of the City of Wolverhampton Council. As there is the possibility that they will be exposed to asbestos dust on more than one occasion during clean-up procedures, their total exposure can be much higher than that of members of the public. For this reason they are required to wear protective equipment, such as dust masks and overalls, to minimise any potential intake of asbestos.

When I handled some debris which landed in my garden, I think I may have breathed in some dust. What should I do?

If you have breathed in dust it is likely to be in a relatively small amount. This single short-term exposure should not significantly affect your health. Asbestos is present in small quantities in both urban and rural air in the UK and so we are all breathing in small amounts of asbestos fibres over our lifetimes. The amount you may have breathed in from this one fire will be insignificant in comparison with our overall background exposure during the course of our lives.

I have accidentally trodden on some asbestos containing material on my shoes and it is now in my carpet, what should I do?

The carpet will need to be cleaned by specialists. Do not attempt to sweep or vacuum up the debris as this will only create or spread any dust. You are advised to contact City of Wolverhampton Council on 01902 551155 for further advice. In addition your house contents insurer may also be able to assist.

I have some dust and debris from the fire on my clothing, what should I do?

If the clothing was drying in the garden at the time of the fire then as a precaution the clothing should be washed in lukewarm water for at least 10-15 minutes to remove any trace of asbestos fibres.

I have heard breathing in asbestos can cause cancer, can you tell me more in relation to this fire?

It is important to reiterate that asbestos fibres were not released into the air unless the ACM is severely damaged or mishandled. This is why it is important to not handle the asbestos containing material from the fire yourself and to let any debris be removed by those that have been trained to do so.

To encounter any long term health effects from asbestos, a direct exposure by inhaling asbestos fibres would have needed to have taken place over a long period of time.

For this fire, Public Health Practitioners from Public Health England and the Local Authority Public Health team have offered reassurance to local residents that this fire will present a low risk to public health in the long term. However if people do have any questions then they should seek assistance from their own GP or NHS Direct/NHS 111 on tel: 0845 46 47 or 111 as appropriate.

