What Is Asbestos?

Asbestos is a naturally occurring mineral. It differs from other minerals in its crystal development. The crystal formation of asbestos is in the form of long thin fibers. Asbestos is divided into two mineral groups --- Serpentine and Amphibole. The division between the two types of asbestos is based upon the crystalline structure. Serpentines have a sheet or layered structure where amphiboles have a chain-like structure.

As the only member of the serpentine group, Chrysotile (A, B) is the most common type of asbestos found in buildings. Also known as "white asbestos," Chrysotile makes up approximately 90%-95% of all asbestos contained in buildings in the United States.

In the amphibole group, there are five types of asbestos. As an acronym for the Asbestos Mines of South Africa, Amosite is the second most prevalent type of asbestos found in building materials. Amosite is also known as "brown asbestos." Next, there is Crocidolite or "blue asbestos," which is an asbestos found in specialized high temperature applications. The other three types (Anthophyllite, Tremolite, and Actinolite) are rare and found mainly as contaminants in other minerals. Asbestos deposits can be found throughout the world and are still mined in Australia, Canada, South Africa, and the former Soviet Union.

Over the years, asbestos has had many uses. Its primary use is as an insulator or fire retardant, but can also be used as a binder. Due to this versatility, asbestos can be found in many types of building materials. Even though the federal government placed a moratorium on the production of most asbestos products in the early 1970's, installation of these products continued through the late 1970's and even into the early 1980's.