

# City Beat

*There are eight million stories in my albums. This is one of them...*

Asbestos is a term used to refer to six naturally occurring silicate minerals. All are composed of long and thin fibrous crystals, each fiber being composed of many microscopic 'fibrils' that can be released into the atmosphere by abrasion and other processes. Asbestos is an excellent electrical insulator and is highly heat-resistant, so for many years it was used as a building material. However, it is now a well-known health and safety hazard and the use of asbestos as a building material is illegal in many countries. Inhalation of asbestos fibers can lead to various serious lung conditions, including asbestosis and cancer.

Archaeological studies have found evidence of asbestos being used as far back as the Stone Age to strengthen ceramic pots, but large-scale mining began at the end of the 19th century when manufacturers and builders began using asbestos for its desirable physical properties. Wealthy Persians amazed guests by cleaning a cloth by exposing it to fire. For example, according to Tabari, one of the curious items belonging to Khosrow II Parviz, the great Sassanian king (r. 590–628), was a napkin he cleaned simply by throwing it into fire. Such cloth is believed to have been made of asbestos imported over the Hindu Kush. Some Persians believed the fiber was the fur of an animal called the samandar, which lived in fire and died when exposed to water; this was where the former belief originated that the salamander could tolerate fire.

Charlemagne, the first Holy Roman Emperor (800–814), is said to have had a tablecloth made of asbestos. Marco Polo recounts having been shown, in a place he calls Ghinghin talas, "a good vein from which the cloth which we call of salamander, which cannot be burnt if it is thrown into the fire, is made ..."

Some archaeologists believe that ancients made shrouds of asbestos, wherein they burned the bodies of their kings to preserve only their ashes and to prevent the ashes being mixed with those of wood or other combustible materials commonly used in funeral pyres. Others assert that the ancients used asbestos to make perpetual wicks for sepulchral or other lamps. A famous example is the golden lamp asbestos lychnis, which the sculptor Callimachus made for the Erechtheion. In more recent centuries, asbestos was indeed used for this purpose.

Asbestos was widely used during the 20th century until the 1970s, when public recognition of the health hazards of asbestos dust led to its prohibition in mainstream construction and fireproofing in most countries. Despite this, and in part because the consequences of exposure can take decades to arise, at least 100,000 people per year are thought to die from diseases related to asbestos exposure.

Despite the severity of asbestos-related diseases, the material has been widely used all over the world, and most buildings constructed before the 1980s are thought to contain asbestos. Many developing countries still support the use of asbestos as a building material, and mining of asbestos is ongoing, with top producer Russia having produced about one million tons in 2015. [<https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Asbestos>]

