Asbestos Exposure

What it means
What to do



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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION,
AND WELFARE
Public Health Service
National Institutes of Health

"Asbestos" is the name for a family of minerals which occur naturally as masses of fibers. These fibers have a tendency to break easily into a dust of tiny particles that can float in the air, stick to clothes and may be easily inhaled or swallowed.

Uses

Asbestos has been used widely in many industries during the past four decades as insulation and fireproofing, and in textiles and construction. Shipbuilding has been a major user of asbestos because the substance is good for insulating boilers, steampipes, hot water pipes and nuclear reactors in ships. Today, about 800,000 tons of asbestos are mined or processed yearly to make over 3,000 different products in the United States. Two-thirds of these are used in the construction industry. Among past and current uses of asbestos are:

- coverings for pipes and surfaces (in new construction of ships, repairs and refittings); insulation in construction, powerhouses and chemical plants, and for engines, hulls and decks of ships; coatings for cables and electric wires; and putties, caulks, paints and cement.
- floor and ceiling tiles, sealants, pipe covering and patching tape compounds.
- friction products such as clutch facings, brake linings for automobiles, railroad cars and airplanes; filtration materials and theater curtains.
- a wide variety of asbestos cement material and wallboards.

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The problem for workers

Health hazards from asbestos dust have been recognized among workers heavily exposed in shipbuilding trades, asbestos mines, asbestos manufacturing, in insulation work in the construction and building trades, and among workers who used asbestos products in a variety of other trades.

Since the early 1940's, as many as 11 million American workers may have been exposed to concentrations of asbestos dust, including some 4.5 million workers in shipyards during the peak shipbuilding years of World War II.

Exposure to asbestos on the job may increase risk of four serious diseases:

1. Asbestosis — A chronic lung ailment which can produce shortness of breath and lung damage. The disease results from inhalation of asbestos dust.
2. Lung Cancer — There is a close association between asbestos exposure and increased occurrence of lung cancer.
3. Mesothelioma — A cancer that involves the thin membrane lining the chest and abdomen. Most mesotheliomas can be traced to prior asbestos exposure.
4. Other Cancers — Several studies have indicated a link between asbestos exposure and increased occurrence of cancers of the esophagus (food tube leading to the stomach), stomach, colon and rectum.

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Who is at risk?

The best estimates of the increased risks associated with asbestos exposure are based on U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare-supported studies of workers heavily exposed to asbestos before the government began to regulate asbestos in the workplace in the late 1960's and early 1970's. As a result of recent government regulation, current workers, without previous exposure, can be expected to face smaller risks than those exposed in the past.

There is evidence that exposure to asbestos dust substantially increases the risk of asbestosis and certain cancers in workers with jobs in or near asbestos-contaminated areas. Scientific information now available indicates that workers may not begin to show signs of disease for 30 or more years.

Recent studies of shipyard workers, including those exposed to asbestos even for brief periods of time (as little as a month or two), indicate the presence, in some, of asbestos-related diseases. Even some workers who may not have worked directly with asbestos, but whose jobs were located near contaminated areas, have developed asbestosis, mesothelioma, or an excess of other cancers associated with asbestos exposure.

There is also some evidence that members of families of workers heavily exposed to asbestos face an increased risk of developing mesothelioma and perhaps other asbestos-related diseases, probably as a result of exposure to asbestos dust brought into the home on the shoes and clothing of workers.

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How big is the risk?

Many workers exposed to asbestos — perhaps most — may suffer no apparent ill effects. However, others are likely to develop diseases related to asbestos.

Asbestos bonded in finished products is not a risk to health, as long as the product is not damaged or disturbed in such a way as to free fibers into the air. Since the fibers are nearly indestructible, a risk exists if fibers are set free.

It is known that risk increases with increased amounts of exposure and the length of time a worker is exposed. Once the asbestos particles work their way into body tissues, they tend to stay there indefinitely.

Some studies have shown that lung cancer has caused up to 25 percent of all deaths in workers heavily exposed to asbestos in the past, compared to a lifetime lung cancer risk of 4 to 5 percent in the general population.

In these same studies of death records of asbestos workers, some 7 percent died of asbestosis. Seven to 10 percent of such workers died of mesothelioma, and 4 percent of these asbestos-exposed individuals died of gastrointestinal cancers (stomach, colon, esophagus), compared to 2 percent in the general population.

Smoking

While asbestos by itself can increase the risk of lung cancer, asbestos and cigarette smoking together increase lung cancer risk five-fold over the already high risk due to smoking alone. Asbestos workers who also were cigarette smokers have been 30 to 90 times more likely to develop lung cancer than nonexposed, nonsmokers.

There is also some evidence that quitting smoking will reduce risk among asbestos-exposed workers, perhaps as much as half. **So if you were exposed to asbestos on the job any-**

National Cancer Institute, Asbestos Exposure: What It Means, What to Do (1978)
ACL Doc 24557 · Page 5 of 15
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time in your life, or suspect you were, you should not smoke.

Who needs to be examined?

If you have been exposed (or suspect you have been) to asbestos dust on the job, or via a family contact, you should consult with your doctor. Regular check-ups could mean earlier detection and may provide a better chance for successful treatment should you become sick.

Your doctor should be told of your work history and any symptoms you may have. He or she is likely to give you a thorough physical examination, including a chest X-ray and lung function tests. Interpretation of the chest X-ray may require the help of a specialist who is experienced in reading X-rays for asbestos-related diseases. Other tests may be necessary depending on your specific situation.

The symptoms of asbestos-related diseases may not become apparent for many years. If you have any of these symptoms, however, schedule an examination without delay:

- shortness of breath
- a cough or change in cough pattern
- blood in the fluid coughed up from your lungs
- pain in the chest or abdomen
- difficulty in swallowing, or prolonged hoarseness
- rapid large weight loss

Treatment

Deaths from asbestosis are due mainly to lung infections that attack weakened lungs. These can be treated with the greatest success following early medical attention. Aggressive treatment may be important should you develop a lung infection. As a protective measure, depending on your situation, your doctor may wish to give you one of the currently effective vaccines against influenza or pneumococcal pneumonia.

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Treatment of all cancers is individually tailored and may include surgery, drugs, radiation or combinations of these therapies.

How can current workers protect themselves?

Employers are required to follow regulations issued by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) dealing with asbestos exposure on the job.

If you are concerned about asbestos exposure in your workplace, discuss the situation with other employees and your employer. If necessary, OSHA can give you more information or make an inspection.

Workers may get a copy of the Standard on Worker Exposure to Asbestos from the Office of Information, OSHA, Washington, D.C. 20210 or from a regional office in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Atlanta, Chicago, Kansas City (Mo.), Dallas, Denver, San Francisco and Seattle.

Information is available for insulation installers who may be exposed to asbestos in a *Good Practices Manual* available through the Clearinghouse for Occupational Safety and Health Information, National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), 4667 Columbia Parkway, Cincinnati, Ohio 45226. This booklet recommends on-the-job procedures for those working with asbestos.

Any exposure that may aggravate respiratory ailments should be avoided. Information on possible workplace exposures is available from the NIOSH Clearinghouse.

Recommended work practices for renovation projects also are available in another booklet, *Sprayed Asbestos-Containing Materials in Buildings*, from the Standards Development Branch, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Research Triangle Park, North Carolina 27711.

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Use all protective equipment, work practices, and safety procedures your employer provides. If you have questions, check with OSHA.

If you smoke cigarettes, stop.

More facts about asbestos exposure

Q. Will the government provide examinations and treatment, or will the government pay for these? What about insurance coverage?

A. Medical services related to asbestos exposure are available through the Government only for certain groups of eligible individuals. In general, medical services are available through non-governmental doctors and facilities and paid for by the individuals affected unless they are covered by private or government health insurance programs. (Check your policies.) Medicare will reimburse people with symptoms of asbestos-related diseases for the costs of appropriate diagnosis and treatment.

Victims of asbestos-related disease may also qualify for financial help, including medical payments, under State worker compensation laws. Eligibility requirements vary from State to State, so contact the State worker compensation program in the State where last exposure occurred.

If your exposure resulted from employment in a Federal agency (military or civilian), you may be covered for medical expenses and other compensation by FECA, the Federal Employees' Compensation Act. If you are presently employed in a shipyard by a private employer, or have been in the past, you may be covered under the Longshoremen and Harbor Workers Compensation Act. For information about eligibility for these two compensation programs, contact the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Workers Compensation Programs, Employment Stand-

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1 - 83

ards Administration, 200 Constitution Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20210.

If you have retired from the military, you and your eligible dependents may receive health care at any Department of Defense medical facility. If no such facility is available within 40 miles of home, you may seek care at a Veterans Administration or Public Health Service hospital. Where no Federal facility is available, you must seek care at a civilian facility under the Civilian Health and Medical Program for the Uniformed Services (CHAMPUS). If you are over 65, you must obtain medical care through Medicare.

If you are a former military man or woman and believe you may have a service-related medical problem, you may inquire about care at a Veterans Administration facility or telephone the local Veterans Administration office. In addition, you may seek care from your private physician (at your own expense).

Workers also may wish to contact their international unions or the Industrial Union or Metal Trades Departments of the AFL-CIO, 815 — 16th Street N.W., Washington, D.C. 20006 for information on other sources of medical help and insurance matters.

Q. Will my doctor know what to do about asbestos-related health risks?

A. The U.S. Surgeon General recently has sent a special alert to 400,000 doctors advising them about the care of patients who were or may have been exposed to asbestos dust and/or patients with asbestos-related diseases. In addition, an educational program for doctors and the public is under development by the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare with help from unions and the asbestos industry and health organizations such as the American Cancer Society and the American Lung Association.

National Cancer Institute, Asbestos Exposure: What It Means, What to Do (1978)
ACL Doc 24557 · Page 9 of 15
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Q. Are there non-occupational exposures from products contaminated with asbestos particles?

A. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) is concerned with asbestos contamination of foods, drugs and cosmetics. For answers to questions on these topics, write to Consumer Inquiries, FDA, 5600 Fishers Lane, HFJ-10, Rockville, Maryland 20857. The Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) has responsibility for bans on the use of asbestos as artificial ash for ceramic logs in gas-burning fireplaces, consumer clothing made of asbestos and dry-wall patches made with the mineral. For questions about the potential hazards of commercial products, call the CPSC at 800-638-2666 (in Maryland, 800-492-2937). Inquiries about air and water contamination should be made to the Public Information Center, PM-215, 401 M Street, S.W., Washington, D.C. 20460.

For further information

Cancer Information Services (CIS) offices around the nation provide toll-free telephone answers to your questions about cancer and other asbestos-related diseases, their causes, prevention, diagnosis, and treatment.

A new publication, *Cancer and the Worker*, describes what we know — and do not know — about cancer risks in general in the workplace. The book is based on a meeting of scientists dealing with occupational cancer held in March 1975 and is available for $2.00 from the New York Academy of Sciences, 2 East 63rd Street, New York, New York 10021.

For further information from labor or industry sources, contact:

Labor — your international union, or the Industrial Union or Metal Trades Departments of the AFL-CIO, 815-16th Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20006.

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Industry — Asbestos Information Association/North America, 1745 Jefferson Davis Highway, Arlington, Virginia 22202.

Other sources of information on lung disease, cancer, and how to quit smoking are provided by local offices of the American Lung Association and the American Cancer Society. These organizations have offices throughout the United States.

Pass it on

If you have a friend or relative who has been or is exposed to asbestos, please pass along this publication to that person.

National Cancer Institute, Asbestos Exposure: What It Means, What to Do (1978)
ACL Doc 24557 · Page 11 of 15
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asbestosclaims.law/library/24557/11

Telephone Numbers to Call

CALIFORNIA*
LAC-USC Cancer Center
From Area Codes (213), (714) and (805): 1-800-252-9066

CALIFORNIA
San Diego County
American Cancer Society
(714) 235-6586

COLORADO*
Colorado Regional Cancer Center
1-800-332-1850

CONNECTICUT*
Yale University
Comprehensive Cancer Center
1-800-922-0824

DELAWARE*
Fox Chase Cancer Center
1-800-523-3586

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA*
(Includes suburban Maryland and northern Virginia)
Cancer Communications for Metropolitan Washington
(202) 232-2833

FLORIDA*
Comprehensive Cancer Center for the State of Florida
Florida: 1-800-432-5953
Dade County: (305) 547-6920

HAWAII
Cancer Information Line
(808) 536-0111

ILLINOIS*
Illinois Cancer Council
Illinois: 800-972-0586
Chicago: (312) 346-9813

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Telephone numbers to Call (cont.)

MAINE*
Maine Cancer Information Service
1-800-225-7034

MARYLAND*
The Johns Hopkins Oncology Center
800-492-1444

MASSACHUSETTS*
Massachusetts Cancer Information Service
1-800-952-7420

MICHIGAN
Public Response Program
CANCER ACTION NOW
at the Michigan Cancer Foundation
from Area Code (313): 1-800-462-9191

MINNESOTA*
Minnesota Cancer Council
1-800-582-5262

MONTANA*
Montana Cancer Information Service
1-800-525-0231

NEW HAMPSHIRE*
New Hampshire Cancer Information Service
1-800-225-7034

NEW JERSEY*
Fox Chase Cancer Center
800-523-3586

NEW MEXICO*
New Mexico Cancer Information Service
1-800-525-0231

NEW YORK*
Roswell Park Memorial Institute
New York State: 1-800-462-7255
Erie County: (716) 845-4400

NEW YORK CITY*
Memorial Sloan-Kettering
Cancer Center
(212) 794-7982

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NORTH CAROLINA*
Duke Comprehensive Cancer Center
North Carolina: 800-672-0943
Durham County: (919) 286-2266

PENNSYLVANIA*
Fox Chase Cancer Center
1-800-822-3963

TEXAS*
M.D. Anderson Hospital
and Tumor Institute
Texas: 1-800-392-2040
Houston: (713) 792-3245

VIRGINIA
American Cancer Society
Tidewater Regional Cancer Network of the
Eastern Virginia Medical Authority
Cancer Answer Service
from Richmond: (804) 359-1308
elsewhere in Virginia: 1-800-552-7996

WASHINGTON*
Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center
Washington: 1-800-562-2875
Seattle Metro: (206) 284-7263

WISCONSIN*
Wisconsin Clinical Cancer Center
University of Wisconsin
800-362-8038

WYOMING*
Wyoming Cancer Information Service
1-800-525-0231

*Cancer Information Services

Other states are served by a national Cancer Information Service (CIS) line: 800-638-6694

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Individuals exposed to asbestos should:

1. Stop smoking.
2. Get regular health checkups.
3. Get prompt medical attention for any respiratory illness.
4. Use all protective equipment, work practices, and safety procedures designed for working around asbestos.

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National Cancer Institute

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