

Asbestos-related disease

What is asbestos?

Asbestos is a naturally occurring fibre which is mined in various parts of the World, notably South Africa and Canada. It occurs in three forms known as blue, brown and white asbestos. It can be processed in several ways for industrial use. Its properties of resistance to heat, electricity and sound make it useful for a variety of purposes, particularly insulation and brake linings. Unfortunately, asbestos can be a hazard to health and for this reason its use has declined considerably in recent years.

What is asbestosis?

Asbestosis is a type of fibrous or scarring of the lungs caused by asbestos fibres which have lodged in the lungs after being inhaled from the air. The fibrosis causes the lungs to shrink, resulting in breathlessness. Asbestosis develops in some people who have breathed in a substantial amount of asbestos dust in the course of their work. It usually shows itself a long time after inhalation of the dust, often twenty or thirty years after the start of the exposure.

Other diseases caused by asbestos

Asbestos causes a number of diseases other than asbestosis. The term 'asbestosis' is commonly used by the media to refer to any disease caused by asbestos, and this can lead to confusion. Other conditions caused by asbestos include pleural thickening, mesothelioma and lung cancer.

Pleural thickening

The pleura is a two-layered membrane which surrounds the lungs and lines the inside of the rib cage. Some asbestos fibres inhaled into the lungs work their way out to the pleura, and may cause fibrosis or scarring to develop there. This causes the pleura to thicken and this may show up on a chest x-ray. Pleural thickening occurs in two forms. Diffuse pleural thickening extends over a large area and may restrict expansion of the lungs, leading to breathlessness. Pleural plaques are localised areas of pleural thickening which usually do not interfere with breathing.

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Mesothelioma

Mesothelioma is a malignant tumour which begins in the pleura or in the peritoneum, the lining of the abdominal cavity. Asbestos, and other similar fibres, which are found in the soil in some parts of the World, are the only known causes of mesothelioma. The risk of mesothelioma is highest in those who have been heavily exposed to asbestos, but the condition occasionally occurs in people who have had relatively light exposure.

Lung cancer

Exposure to asbestos increases the risk of developing lung cancer. A very important point is that asbestos exposure and smoking act together to produce a huge risk of lung cancer in people exposed to both hazards. Fortunately, this means that people who have been exposed to asbestos can greatly reduce the risk of lung cancer by not smoking.

Prevention

Strict regulations now exist to prevent dangerous levels of exposure to asbestos. Asbestos is gradually being removed from situations in buildings where it might present a hazard.

Asbestos in buildings

Asbestos is still present in a wide variety of buildings, including hospitals, schools and homes, often in the walls and ceilings as well as in lagging around steam pipes and boilers. Discovery of asbestos in a building often causes alarm among people living or working in it. Usually this alarm is not justified. Providing the asbestos is well maintained and preferably covered by an impermeable layer of paint or other material, so that it is not releasing dust, it does not present any hazard to health. It is only the inhalation of loose asbestos fibres which causes disease.

Compensation

People suffering from asbestos-induced disease can usually take legal action against employers who exposed them to dangerous quantities of asbestos. They can also apply to the Benefits Agency for industrial injuries benefit if they suffer from various asbestos-related conditions known as 'prescribed diseases'. At present these are asbestosis, bilateral diffuse pleural thickening, lung cancer accompanied by one of the first two conditions, and mesothelioma. Pleural plaques alone are not recognised for compensation by the Benefits Agency, although an employer can be sued for compensation for pleural plaques alone.

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A form for application for industrial injuries benefit can be obtained from your local Benefits Agency office; or download the application form from www.dwp.gov.uk

Further advice, support and information can be obtained from:

- Mesothelioma UK is based at the National Macmillan Mesothelioma Resource Centre and provides informational and support for patients, carers and health professionals.

www.mesothelioma.uk.com

Free Phone Helpline 0800 169 2409

- Asbestos Forum is an organisation which campaigns for patients with Asbestos related disease including mesothelioma

www.asbestosforum.org

Tel: 0161 953 4037

- Occupational & Environmental Diseases Association (OEDA)
Mitre House
66 Abbey Road
Bush Hill Park
Enfield
EN1 2QN
Tel: 0208 360 8490

- Clydesdale Action on Asbestos - for free confidential advice

Tel: 0800 587 7517