

Silicosis

What is silicosis?

Silicosis is a long-term lung disease caused by breathing in dust containing silica. This causes inflammation (swelling) in your lungs, which can lead to lung scarring over time. This makes your lungs become hardened and stiff (fibrosis). Lung tissue that is hardened in this way does not function properly, and it can become more difficult to breathe.

What causes silicosis?

Silicosis is caused by breathing in dust which contains silica such as stone dust and sand. Silica dust is created when you cut, sand, drill, polish or grind stones containing silica.

You can get silicosis if you have breathed in high levels of silica dust over months, or smaller amounts of silica dust over years. You can develop silicosis even if you have not worked with silica for many years.

What are the main symptoms?

People with silicosis don't usually have any symptoms in the early stages of the disease. You might even notice symptoms only after you have stopped working with silica dust.

The main symptoms of silicosis are:

- cough
- chest tightness
- breathlessness
- tiredness and weakness

Silicosis can also cause diseases which can give you other symptoms such as:

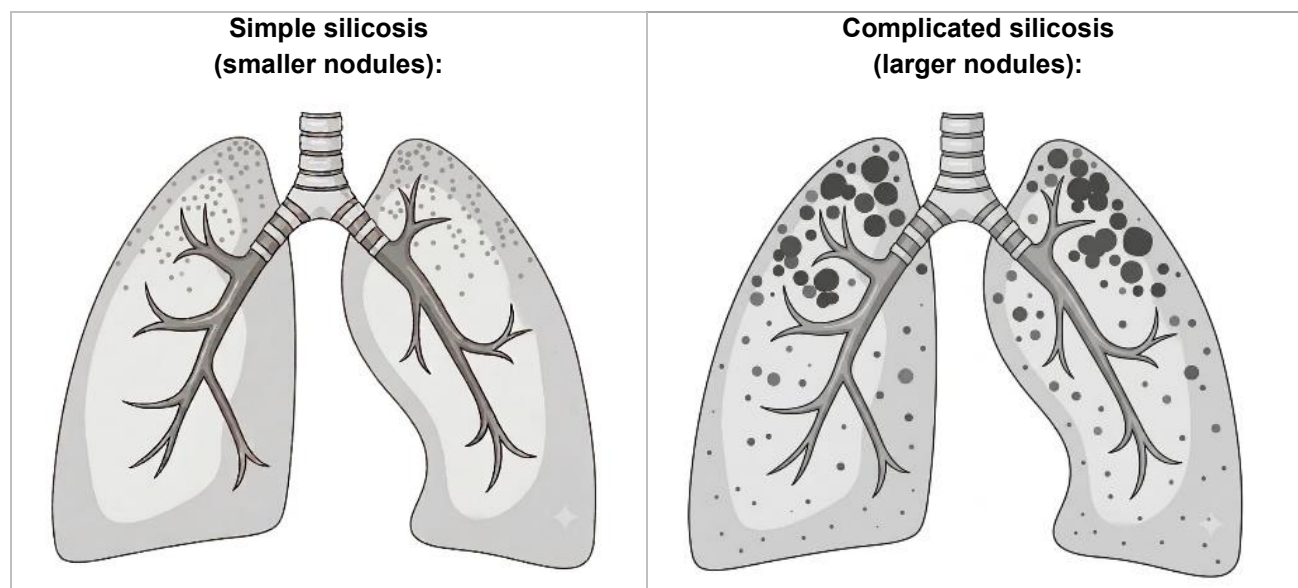
- hair loss
- joint pains
- dry eyes and mouth
- night sweats

Having a chronic disease like silicosis can also cause mental health problems including difficulty sleeping and low mood.

How is silicosis diagnosed?

Silicosis is diagnosed on a chest x-ray or a CT scan. A CT scan gives a more detailed picture of the lungs. Silicosis shows on a scan as small dots or 'nodules'.

There are different stages of silicosis. The two main stages are simple and complicated which depends on the size of the nodules.



At your hospital appointments we will ask you what jobs you have done, symptoms you might have, and whether you smoke.

We will do breathing, blood and urine tests. We might also arrange other tests.

How is silicosis treated?

Unfortunately there is no cure for silicosis because the lung damage cannot be reversed. Treatment aims to relieve symptoms and improve quality of life.

These might include:

- Inhalers to open up your airways.
- Medications to treat cough.
- Anti-fibrotic medication which are anti-scarring tablets used to treat other lung diseases and may help some people with progressive silicosis.
- Washing your lungs ("lung lavage") to try to remove some silica from your lungs but there is no evidence this improves your lungs.
- Oxygen therapy if you have low blood oxygen levels.
- Pulmonary rehabilitation classes or exercise.

We may discuss referring you to our local lung transplant service. A lung transplant is a major operation and can only be considered if you are otherwise in good health and are not smoking.

We regularly speak to specialists across the world to talk about new treatment options.

How can I help myself?

For most people with silicosis, the most important thing is to **stop being exposed to silica dust**. This might mean changing your job or workplace. We know this is not always an easy decision.

Workplaces should follow health and safety law to protect workers from silica dust. But it is important to know that just wearing a face mask is often not enough to protect you from silica dust exposure. If you continue to work with silica dust you may want to talk to your employer about how to protect yourself and others at work.

You should also:

- **Stop smoking** cigarettes and shisha – any smoking will make silicosis worse
- **Keep active** – aim to walk 10,000 steps a day
- Look after your **mental health** – speak with friends and family you trust, and let your doctor know if you would like to speak to a counsellor
- Have **regular vaccinations** for flu/COVID/pneumonia if your doctor tells you to
- **Go to all your hospital appointments** – silicosis can develop slowly or quickly, and it is important for us to look for any changes. Bring a friend or family member with you to help you remember what has been discussed.

What support is there for me?

If you have silicosis you can get different types of financial and other support.

Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit

You can apply for a Government benefit called Industrial Injuries Disablement Benefit, or IIDB. This is a sum of money paid weekly to people with silicosis and other industrial diseases.

You do not need to tell your workplace if you apply for this benefit.

If you have always been self-employed, you will not be able to get this this benefit.



To apply for this benefit, print and complete the application form from the Government website – scan the QR code.

You can get help to complete the form. If you are based in London, you can contact **LASAG**, a charity which helps people with silicosis to apply for benefits (Tel: 0808 278 2515). There are similar charities outside of London you can find on this helpful map here: <https://asbestosforum.org.uk/get-advice>

You can also contact your local Citizens Advice Bureau for support to complete the application form: <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/about-us/contact-us/nearby>

Civil compensation

You may also be able to make a civil claim for compensation against your employer's insurance company. It does not matter if you have worked for more than one company. It does not matter if your company has closed.

If you want to find out more then you should speak to a lawyer who has experience working with industrial diseases. We can give you names of companies who may be helpful. Making a legal claim usually takes more than a year. This should be done on a 'no win, no fee' basis.

Mental health support

Living with a long-term disease like silicosis can affect your mental health. So it is really important that you have the right people around you to support you on this journey.

We are here to help you take things step by step, to understand what is happening and how you might be feeling, and to connect you to support. We will also ask about your mental health during your hospital appointments. If you want to speak to a counsellor, let your doctor know.

You can also refer yourself for "talking therapies". To do this type the name of your GP surgery at this website: <https://www.nhs.uk/service-search/mental-health-services/find-nhs-talking-therapies-for-anxiety-and-depression/enter-gp>

What happens next? How often will you check on me?

We will organise regular appointments to see you and tests to monitor your health.

How often we see you will be based on your individual situation and health.

Make sure you go to all your appointments – silicosis can develop slowly or quickly, and it is important for us to notice quickly if there are any changes.

You should see your GP for other health issues as normal.

Contact us

Please contact the NHS Occupational Lung Disease clinic if you have any questions about the information in this leaflet:

Phone or text: 07977 352 164 (available Monday-Friday, 9am-5pm)

Email: gstt.OCLD@nhs.net

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Developed using feedback from patients and families