

Asbestos Health Effects Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

Q. What is asbestos?

A. Asbestos is a group of six naturally occurring fibrous minerals. Serpentine or chrysotile is the most commonly used form of asbestos. Chrysotile fibers are curly and flexible, while the minerals that make up the amphibole family (amosite, crocidolite, anthophyllite, tremolite, and actinolite) have needle-shaped fibers. Asbestos has been mined and globally used in commercial applications since the late 1800s for its heat, chemical, water, and abrasion-resistant properties.

Q. How does asbestos exposure occur?

A. When asbestos or asbestos-containing materials are damaged or disturbed, fibers are released into the air. These microscopic fibers can remain suspended in the air for long periods. Once airborne, fibers are at risk of being inhaled. Although less common, people can ingest asbestos fibers. Most of these fibers eventually leave the body, but a small fraction may become lodged in the gastrointestinal lining and may cause harm.

Q. Can exposure to asbestos cause health problems?

A. Yes. Inhalation or ingestion of asbestos fibers, whether naturally occurring or not, can cause asbestos-related diseases. When asbestos becomes airborne, the microscopic fibers can be inhaled and trapped in the lungs. Asbestos exposure does not always mean you will develop

health problems. Various factors affect your risk of developing asbestos-related diseases, including length and frequency of exposure, the type and quantity of asbestos inhaled, cigarette smoking, and existing lung health.

Q. What health effects does asbestos exposure cause?

A. Signs of asbestos-related diseases can show up 10

to 40 years after exposure. Asbestos primarily affects the lungs and the lining surrounding the lungs (the pleural membrane), resulting in asbestosis and pleural failure. Asbestosis is a disease caused by chronic inflammation and the buildup of scar tissue around asbestos fibers inside the lungs. This scarring makes breathing labored and dramatically increases your risk of lung infections. This pleural disease causes changes in the lungs and chest cavity lining, including shortness of breath, especially when exercising. Inhalation of asbestos fibers is also linked to cancer.

Q. What is my risk of getting cancer from asbestos exposure?

A. Asbestos is classified as a known human carcinogen. Epidemiology studies show that inhalation of asbestos fibers can increase lung cancer and mesothelioma, a rare cancer of the chest and abdominal cavity lining. Individuals who smoke cigarettes and are exposed to asbestos have a significantly higher risk of cancer than individuals who do not smoke. Asbestos can also cause larynx, stomach, colorectum, and ovarian cancers.





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Q. Who is at risk of asbestos exposure?

A. Construction workers, janitors, maintenance staff, HVAC contractors, plumbers, mechanics, transportation workers, electricians, fire-fighters, and asbestos abatement workers may have higher exposure levels than the general population. Workers in these industries are at an increased risk for developing asbestos-caused disease. These workers also may bring asbestos into their homes on their shoes, clothes, or other objects, exposing other household members. Residents conducting their demolition or remodeling are also at risk. Asbestos was widely used in building materials such as pipe insulation, popcorn ceilings, floor tiles, etc., beginning in the 1970s and can still be found in building materials produced today.

Q. Is there a medical test to show whether I have been exposed to asbestos?

A. If you have a history of being around asbestos, your doctor can conduct several medical tests to help diagnose asbestos-related diseases. These tests may be used to detect early signs of lung changes caused by asbestos, but they cannot detect the fibers themselves or determine the extent of exposure or predict future disease.

Q. Can asbestos be removed from the lungs?

A. No known method exists to remove asbestos fibers from the lungs once inhaled. Sometimes the asbestos is cleared or broken down naturally by the immune system in the lungs. Whether this occurs depends on the size and shape of the asbestos inhaled.

Q. How can workers protect themselves from asbestos exposure?

A. Workers concerned about asbestos exposure in the workplace should discuss the situation with other employees, their employee health and safety representative, and their employers. If necessary, OHSA can provide more information or do an inspection. Informationabout regional offices can be found on OHSA's website at https://www.osha.gov/html/RAmap.html.

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