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Information Sheet

## Asbestos and your health



# Asbestos and your health

*Most people are exposed to very small amounts of asbestos in the air they breathe every day and do not develop asbestos-related health problems.*

The four major asbestos-related diseases are:

## **Pleural plaques**

The pleura are the tissues that line the chest cavity and cover the surface of the lungs. Asbestos may produce thickened patches on the pleura (pleural plaques) or a widespread fibrosis of the pleura and pleural effusions (fluid in the chest cavity). These conditions are not cancerous.

## **Asbestosis**

Asbestosis is not a cancer. It is a chronic and progressive lung disease caused by inhaling asbestos fibres over a long period of time. It may take 5 to 20 years before symptoms develop. The accumulated, inhaled asbestos fibres produce scarring (fibrosis) of the lung. The scar tissue, or 'fibrosis', is hard and inflexible – this makes the lungs stiffen and stops them from working properly.

## **Lung cancer**

People exposed to large amounts of asbestos fibres over a long period of time have a significant risk of developing lung cancer. These cancerous tumours mainly occur in the lining of the tubes leading into the lungs, the smaller airways or the middle of the lungs. It usually takes 10 to 20 years for

lung cancer to develop after asbestos exposure.

## **Mesothelioma**

Mesothelioma is a rare cancer affecting the tissue that lines the body cavities, particularly the chest and abdominal cavities. It is caused by past exposure to asbestos. The tumour begins in the pleura and spreads to the lung and chest wall. It can take 30 to 40 years after exposure to asbestos for this condition to develop and be diagnosed.

## **Your Risk of Exposure**

Whether an individual develops an asbestos-related disease depends on a range of exposure factors such as the level and duration of exposure, length of time since first exposure, the fibre type, and concurrent exposure to tobacco smoke and other carcinogens.

The risk of developing an asbestos-related disease increases when a larger number of fibres are breathed in.

Inhalation is the main way that asbestos fibres enter your body. When asbestos fibres are breathed in, they can lodge in lung tissue and cause inflammation, scarring and sometimes more serious asbestos-related diseases. These diseases usually take many years, if not decades, to develop.

People's immune systems vary and hence their risk of contracting disease will also vary. There are particular risks involved when children are exposed to asbestos dust. **The only sensible thing to do is to avoid inhaling asbestos dust**

## **Asbestos in Australia**

Since 2003, asbestos and all products containing asbestos have been banned Australia-wide. These materials cannot be imported, stored, supplied, sold, installed, used or re-used. However, this ban does not cover the asbestos-containing products already in the built and general environment.

Australia has a very high level of asbestos containing materials in public and residential buildings and has the highest per capita number of cases of mesothelioma in the world. **All types of asbestos (white, brown and blue) should be treated as equally hazardous.**

Before stringent controls were enforced, workers involved in the mining, milling or manufacture of asbestos were exposed and many contracted asbestos related disease (ARD). They are referred to as the first wave.

The second wave of cases involved workers in the construction, power and shipbuilding industries who worked with asbestos containing materials. Some of these workers may still be at risk where safe work practices are not followed.

Family members of people working with asbestos were also exposed to asbestos fibres brought home on workers' clothing. In some cases this led to people contracting an ARD. These cases are referred to as bystander cases.

Home renovators who work on asbestos-containing materials in such a way that fibres are released into the air – for example, when using power tools – are particularly at risk. This is referred to as the third wave of exposure risk.

## **Reducing your risk**

Finding that asbestos containing materials are in your home or workplace does not mean your health is at risk. Studies have shown that bonded

asbestos containing materials, if in sound condition and left undisturbed, do not pose a significant health risk.

When building materials that contain asbestos are weathered, damaged or disturbed (as part of a renovation, for instance) then asbestos fibres can be released, inhaled and possibly affect your health in the future.

If you are planning home renovations and want to reduce your risk of exposure then we suggest you watch our short video [asbestoswise.com.au/information-and-resources/asbestos-in-the-home/](http://asbestoswise.com.au/information-and-resources/asbestos-in-the-home/)

You may also find our Information *Sheet on Asbestos in Your Home* as a useful guide

If you are concerned about possible exposure at work then you should contact your union or WorkSafe.

If your concern is asbestos in the environment then you should contact the Environment Protection Agency (EPA).

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