

Ask Laretta: Questions and Answers about Asbestos Disease

Laretta Higgins answers our hotline, giving out information on asbestos exposure and helping people solve problems. The hotline number is (415) 548-1913, and collect calls are accepted. The hotline hours are 9-12 noon Monday through Friday.

In this regular column, we will focus on common questions asked of Laretta and her advice.

Q. Are all types of asbestos harmful?

A. Yes. Every type of asbestos can cause asbestosis and/or cancer. There are five major types of asbestos: amosite, anthophyllite, chrysotile (the most common form), crocidolite and tremolite. Each can cause asbestosis and each can cause cancer. There is no safe kind of asbestos.

Q. How long has asbestos been used in the United States?

A. A brief history of asbestos use in the U.S. and its toxic effects follows:
1880 — Asbestos introduced to U.S. industry.
1900 — First medically diagnosed death from asbestosis in England.
1918 — American and Canadian insurance companies stopped insuring asbestos workers.
1930 — Relationship between asbestos exposure and asbestosis was confirmed.
1935 — American and English research indicated a link between asbestos exposure and lung cancer.
1955 — The association between asbestos exposure and cancer was confirmed.

Q. What diseases does asbestos exposure cause?

A. Asbestos can cause asbestosis and certain forms of cancer. These in-

clude mesothelioma (cancer of the lining of the lung or stomach), lung cancer, and cancers of the digestive system (esophagus, stomach, colon, rectum).

Q. What is asbestosis?

A. Asbestosis is a scarring of the lungs caused by asbestos fibers lodging in the lungs. The fibers irritate the lung, causing an inflammation. As the inflammation heals it leaves scar tissue that eventually stops the air in the lungs from getting into the bloodstream. The result, after many years, is heart failure or slow suffocation.

Q. What are the warning signs of asbestosis?

A. The most obvious symptom a person will notice is shortness of breath. Activities that were simple, such as climbing stairs, lifting, or walking long distances, will cause severe shortness of breath and become difficult without rest periods. Many victims will also develop pain in the chest or back.

Q. What tests will show asbestosis?

A. Physical examination with emphasis on the sounds of the lungs and condition of the heart, chest x-ray including a side view, and pulmonary function tests to evaluate how lungs function are the standard tests for determining if a patient has asbestosis.

Q. Does asbestosis lead to lung cancer?

A. Not necessarily. It is possible that a person with asbestosis could also develop asbestos-related cancer, but scientists do not believe that asbestosis leads directly to cancer. People who smoke and are exposed to asbestos, however, are at high risk for developing lung cancer.

Q. Will all people exposed to asbestos develop a disease from it?

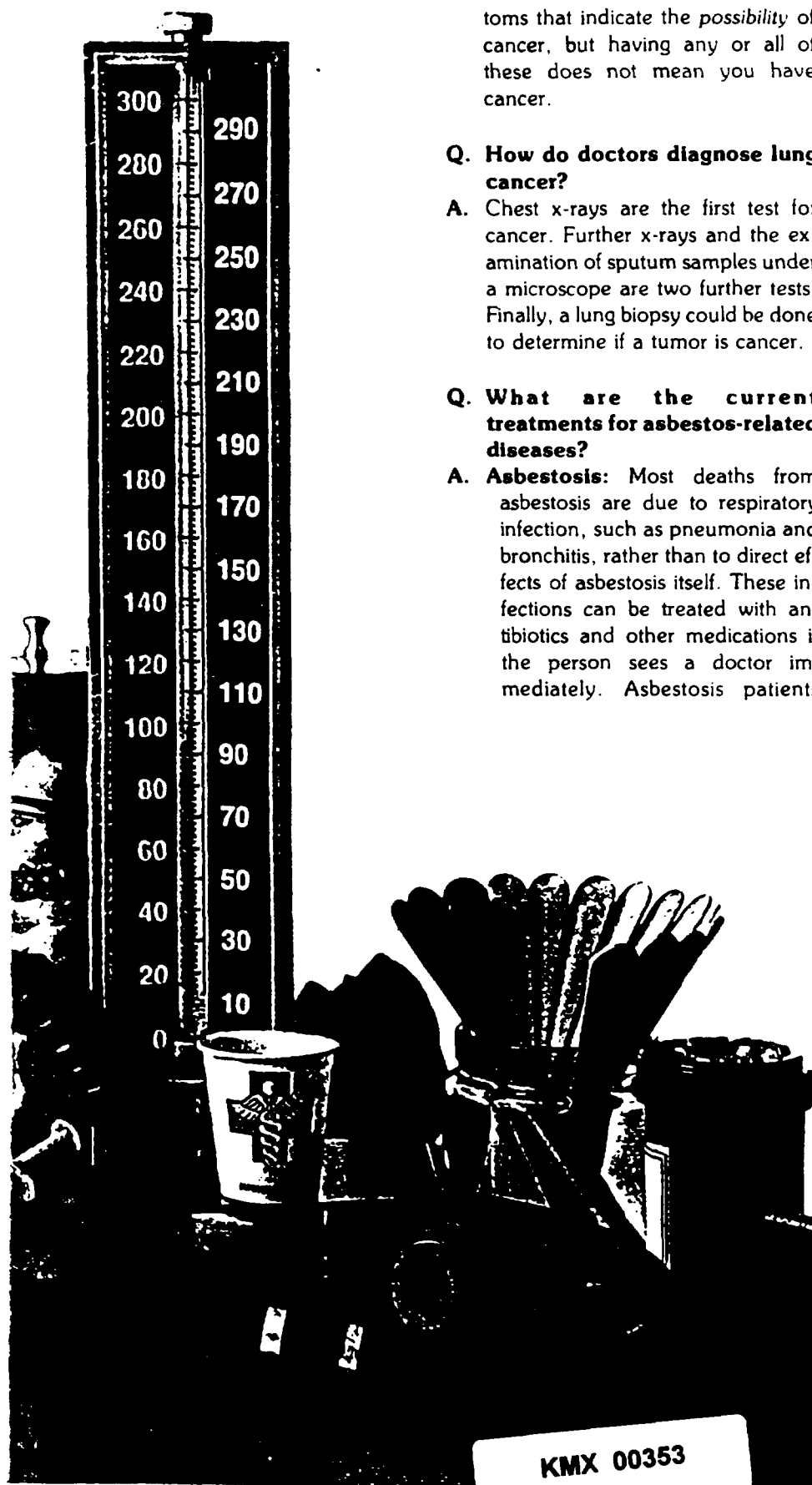
A. No. It is still not understood how asbestos causes asbestosis or cancer, but it is known that toxic materials affect people differently. If two people work side by side, with the same exposure to asbestos, one could develop a disease while the other might not.

Q. What are the first signs of asbestos-related lung cancer?

A. Like lung cancer from any cause, the symptoms would be a persistent cough or change in the cough habit, chest pain in the form of an aggravating ache that is unrelated to the coughing, and possibly sputum streaked with blood and coughed up from the lungs. These are symp-

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toms that indicate the *possibility* of cancer, but having any or all of these does not mean you have cancer.

Q. How do doctors diagnose lung cancer?

A. Chest x-rays are the first test for cancer. Further x-rays and the examination of sputum samples under a microscope are two further tests. Finally, a lung biopsy could be done to determine if a tumor is cancer.

Q. What are the current treatments for asbestos-related diseases?

A. Asbestosis: Most deaths from asbestosis are due to respiratory infection, such as pneumonia and bronchitis, rather than to direct effects of asbestosis itself. These infections can be treated with antibiotics and other medications if the person sees a doctor immediately. Asbestosis patients

whose disease has progressed are often put on oxygen, to be used as needed.

Lung and esophageal cancer:

Treatment of these cancers is based on the type and amount of tissue affected. Lung cancer may be treated by surgery, drugs, radiation, or a combination of these treatments. Cancer of the esophagus is usually treated with radiation. As with most cancers, the treatment is tailored to the individual's case.

Cancer of the rectum or large intestine: Surgery often cures these cases, especially if an early diagnosis is made. There are tests that can detect these cancers early.

Mesothelioma: An effective treatment is not available for malignant (cancerous) mesothelioma. It is usually, but not 100% of the time, fatal.

Cancer of the stomach: New treatments using drugs are improving the outlook for patients with this type of cancer.

Cancers of the kidney, throat, and nasal passages: With early diagnosis, these cancers can be treated effectively with drugs and, sometimes, surgery.

Q. Does asbestos exposure affect mental health?

A. People who have asbestos-related diseases may have feelings of anxiety, deep-seated fears concerning their physical condition and possibly their ability to cope with it. Their family relationships are sometimes affected by these feelings. If a person lives alone, a sense of isolation can cause additional problems. Situations of this kind call for help from people or agencies in the area of mental health who can listen to these problems, make suggestions, refer them to other agencies or self help groups if necessary. Many people with asbestos disease have found it helpful to talk to others with the same problem.