



# THE IRONWORKER

Official Publication of the  
International Association of Bridge,  
Structural and Ornamental Iron Workers  
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ON OUR COVER—Fully-trained and experienced Ironworkers possess a variety of skills unique to the trade. This month's cover features the post-tensioning work of Milwaukee Ironworkers on one of the in North America

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# Cancer In The Workplace

## Second in a series



## An Ironworker Guide to Asbestos Exposure

"Asbestos" is the name for a family of minerals which occur naturally as masses of fibers. These fibers have a tendency to break easily into a dust of tiny particles that can float in the air, stick to clothes and may be easily inhaled or swallowed.

Asbestos has been used widely in many industries during the past four decades as insulation and fireproofing, and in textiles and construction. Shipbuilding has been a major user of asbestos because the substance is good for insulating boilers, steampipes, hot water pipes and nuclear reactors in ships. Today, about 800,000 tons of asbestos are mined or processed yearly to make over 3,000 different products in the United States. Two-thirds of these are used in the construction industry. Among past and current uses of asbestos are:

- coverings for pipes and surfaces (in new construction of ships, repairs and refittings); insulation in construction, powerhouses and chemical plants, and for engines, hulls and decks of ships; coatings for cables and electric wires; and putties, caulks, paints and cement.
- floor and ceiling tiles, sealants, pipe covering and patching tape compounds.
- friction products such as clutch facings, brake linings for automobiles, railroad cars and airplanes; filtration materials and theater curtains.
- a wide variety of asbestos cement material and wallboards.

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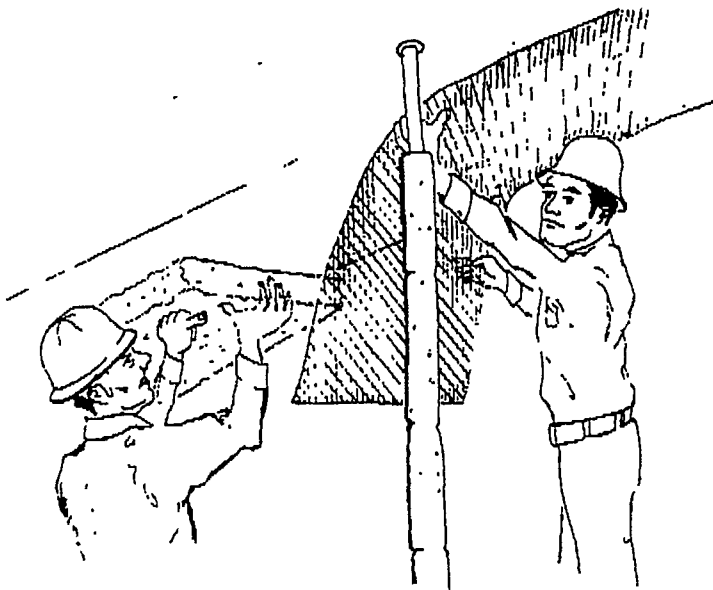
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### Asbestos Hazards

Health hazards from asbestos dust have been recognized among workers heavily exposed in shipbuilding trades, asbestos mines, asbestos manufacturing, in insulation work in the construction and building trades, and among workers who used asbestos products in a variety of other trades.

Since the early 1940's, as many as 11 million American workers may have been exposed to concentrations of asbestos dust, including some 4.5 million workers in shipyards during the peak shipbuilding years of World War II.

Exposure to asbestos on the job may increase risk of four serious diseases:

1. **Asbestosis**—A chronic lung ailment which can produce shortness of breath and lung damage. The disease results from inhalation of asbestos dust.
2. **Lung Cancer**—There is a close association between asbestos exposure and increased occurrence of lung cancer.
3. **Mesothelioma**—A cancer that involves the thin membrane lining the chest and abdomen. Most mesotheliomas can be traced to prior asbestos exposure.
4. **Other Cancers**—Several studies have indicated a link between asbestos exposure and increased occurrence of cancers of the esophagus (food tube leading to the stomach), stomach, colon and rectum.

The best estimates of the increased risks associated with asbestos exposure are based on U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare-supported studies of workers heavily exposed to asbestos before the government began to regulate asbestos in the workplace in the late 1960's and early 1970's. As a result of recent government regulations, current workers, without previous exposure, can be expected to face smaller risks than those exposed in the past.

There is evidence that exposure to asbestos dust substantially increases the risk of asbestosis and certain cancers in workers with jobs in or near asbestos-contaminated areas. Scientific information now available indicates that workers may not begin to show signs of disease for 30 or more years.

Recent studies of shipyard workers, including those exposed to asbestos even for brief periods of time (as little as a month or two), indicate the presence, in some, of asbestos-related diseases. Even some workers who may not have worked directly with asbestos, but whose jobs were located near contaminated areas, have developed asbestosis, mesothelioma, or an excess of other cancers associated with asbestos exposure.

There is also some evidence that members of families of workers heavily exposed to asbestos face an increased risk of developing mesothelioma and perhaps other asbestos-related diseases, probably as a result of exposure to asbestos dust brought into the home on the shoes and clothing of workers.

Many workers exposed to asbestos—perhaps most—may suffer no apparent ill effects. However, others are likely to develop diseases related to asbestos.

Asbestos bonded in finished products is not a risk to health, as long as the product is not damaged or disturbed in such a way as to free fibers into the air. Since the fibers are nearly indestructible, a risk exists if fibers are set free.

It is known that risk increases with increased amounts of exposure and the length of time a worker is exposed. Once the asbestos particles work their way into body tissues, they tend to stay there indefinitely.

Some studies have shown that lung cancer has caused up to 25 percent of all deaths in workers heavily exposed to asbestos in the past compared to a lifetime lung cancer of 4 to 5 percent in the general population.

In these same studies of death records of asbestos workers, some 7 percent died of asbestosis. Seven to 10 percent of such workers died of mesothelioma, and 4 percent of these asbestos-exposed individuals died of gastrointestinal cancers (stomach, colon, esophagus), compared to 2 percent in the general population.

### Smoking and Asbestos

While asbestos by itself can increase the risk of lung cancer, asbestos and cigarette smoking together increase lung cancer risk five-fold over the already high risk due to smoking alone. Asbestos workers who also were cigarette smokers have been 30 to 90 times more likely to develop lung cancer than non-exposed, nonsmokers.

There is also some evidence that quitting smoking will reduce risk among asbestos-exposed workers, perhaps as much as half. So if you were exposed to asbestos on the job anytime in your life, or suspect you were, you should not smoke.

### Medical Exams

If you have been exposed (or suspect you have been) to asbestos dust on the job, or via a family contact, you should consult with your doctor. Regular check-ups could mean earlier detection and may provide a better chance for successful treatment should you become sick.

Your doctor should be told of your work history and any symptoms you may have. He or she is likely to give you a thorough physical examination, including a chest X-ray and lung function tests. Interpretation of the chest X-ray may require the help of a specialist who is experienced in reading X-rays for asbestos-related diseases. Other tests may be necessary depending on your specific situation.

The symptoms of asbestos-related diseases may not become apparent for many years. If you have any of these symptoms, however, schedule an examination without delay:

- shortness of breath
- a cough or change in cough pattern
- blood in the fluid coughed up from your lungs
- pain in the chest or abdomen
- difficulty in swallowing, or prolonged hoarseness
- rapid large weight loss

Deaths from asbestosis are due mainly to lung infections that attack weakened lungs. These can be treated with the greatest success following early medical attention. Aggressive treatment may be important should you develop a lung infection. As a protective measure, depending on your situation, your doctor may wish to give you one of the currently effective vaccines against influenza or pneumococcal pneumonia.

Treatment of all cancers is individually tailored and may include surgery, drugs, radiation or combinations of these therapies.

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## HEW Secretary Califano Outlines Asbestos Problem

Nearly two thousand years ago, Pliny the Elder and other ancient scholars recorded the first signs that asbestos might be harmful: a sickness of the lungs appeared in slaves who weaved asbestos into cloth.

Now scientific studies have demonstrated that asbestos creates an especially high risk of lung cancer and other serious lung diseases for workers heavily exposed to the substance.

But until last April, no systematic effort had ever been undertaken to notify physicians, former asbestos workers and others at risk of the hazards associated with asbestos exposure. Such notification is of special importance because the most serious diseases associated with asbestos takes a long time to develop—from 15 to 35 years or more—and because recent studies have underscored that workers exposed in the past, especially during World War II, may just now be facing immediate, serious health threats.

We are dealing, as you know, with large numbers of workers: The total number exposed to asbestos just since the beginning of World War II is estimated at between 8 and 11 million.

And so last April 26, HEW launched a major campaign to inform doctors, workers, and others about the grave risks of asbestos exposure. Much of the success thus far of the asbestos public awareness campaign is a result of the cooperation and dedication of this country's trade unions. Today I want to thank them—and you—for your heroic efforts.

I cannot emphasize too strongly the importance of this effort. We are learning that the consequences of asbestos exposure are, if anything, even more serious than we originally suspected:

An estimated 5 million American men and women—workers in asbestos plants, insulation workers, construction workers, steamfitters, carpenters, tile setters, auto mechanics, and the like—breathe significant amounts of asbestos fibers, each day.

On the basis of what we know today, it is estimated that 17 percent of all cancer deaths in the United States each year will be associated with previous exposure to asbestos.

And the problem of protecting workers is not yet solved. A new study from Utah reveals that a group of construction workers exposed to asbestos dust developed breathing obstructions not within years—but within a few months of their exposure. And these workers were probably not as heavily exposed as others in the past.

We are, in short, committed—at HEW and throughout this Administration—to a general strategy of prevention and health promotion. We intend to back that commitment with effective action on occupational health and safety.

We are acutely aware that even the most well-conceived Federal programs of occupational safety and health cannot succeed without strong support. There can never be enough official inspectors to visit and adequately monitor every single work site and enforce every single regulation.

But, with your help and that of labor across the nation, there is much that we can accomplish. Every American worker can, in effect, serve as inspector, consultant, and monitor of safety in the work place. Organized labor can preach the gospel of prevention and protection. And we can advance the idea that safety in the work place is an investment, not just an expense.

### Asbestos Regulations and Prevention

Employers are required to follow regulations issued by the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) dealing with asbestos exposure on the job.

If you are concerned about asbestos exposure in your workplace, discuss the situation with other employees and your employer. If necessary, OSHA can give you more information or make an inspection.

Workers may get a copy of the Standard on Worker Exposure to Asbestos from the Office of Information, OSHA, Washington, D.C. 20210 or from a regional office in Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Atlanta, Chicago, Kansas City (Mo.), Dallas, Denver, San Francisco and Seattle.

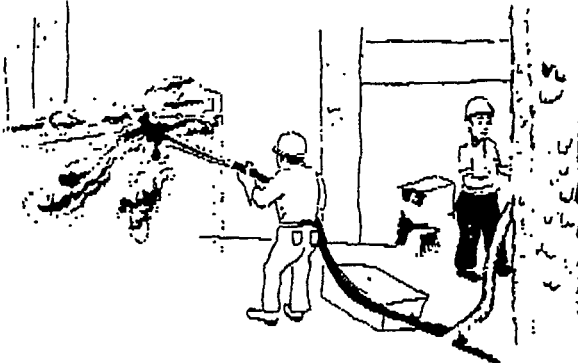
Information is available for insulation installers who may be exposed to asbestos in a *Good Practices Manual* available through the Clearinghouse for Occupational Safety and Health Information, National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), 4667 Columbia Parkway, Cincinnati, Ohio 45226. This booklet recommends on-the-job procedures for those working with asbestos.

Any exposure that may aggravate respiratory ailments should be avoided. Information on possible workplace exposures is available from the NIOSH Clearinghouse.

Recommended work practices for renovation projects also are available in another booklet, *Sprayed Asbestos-Containing Materials in Buildings*, from the Standards Development Branch, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Research Triangle Park, North Carolina 27711.

Use all protective equipment, work practices, and safety procedures your employer provides. If you have questions, check with OSHA.

If you smoke cigarettes, stop.



### Medical Coverage

Medical services related to asbestos exposure are available through the Government only for certain groups of eligible individuals. In general, medical services are available through nongovernmental doctors and facilities and paid for by the individuals affected unless they are covered by private or government health insurance programs. (Check your policies.) Medicare will reimburse people with symptoms of asbestos-related diseases for the costs of appropriate diagnosis and treatment.

Victims of asbestos-related disease may also qualify for financial help, including medical payments, under State worker compensation laws. Eligibility requirements vary from State to State, so contact the State worker compensation program in the State where last exposure occurred.

If your exposure resulted from employment in a Federal agency (military or civilian), you may be covered for medical expenses and other compensation by FECA, the Federal Employees' Compensation Act. If you are presently employed in a shipyard by a private employer, or have been in the past, you may be covered under the Longshoremen and Harbor Workers Compensation Act. For information about eligibility for these two compensation programs, contact the U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Workers Compensation Programs, Employment Standards Administration, 200 Constitution Avenue, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20210.