

It rarely becomes apparent until at least a decade after first exposure. The disease process usually has to be rather advanced to produce shortness of breath, however.

A dry, crackling sound (rales), coming from the lungs during inhalation, is the most characteristic physical sign of asbestosis. Clubbing of the fingers is sometimes found, usually late in the disease. A bluish discoloration of the skin and the lining of the mouth and of the tongue also may occur in the later stages of the disease. A physical exam with X-rays will show diffuse scarring of the lungs as asbestosis develops, and lung function tests will show impairment of the maximum volume of air a worker can inhale.

12. Does asbestosis lead to lung cancer?

Scientists do not believe asbestosis necessarily leads to lung cancer, but the presence of this disease does indicate that a worker received considerable asbestos exposure and has a greater risk of developing asbestos-associated cancers than an unexposed person.

Both types of disease can be caused by the same environmental agent, and the development of each may be independent of the other.

13. What are the symptoms of lung cancer?

A cough, or a change in cough habit, is found in most lung cancer patients. Chest pain is the second most common symptom. It is usually felt as a persistent ache unrelated to cough and is commonly experienced on the side on which the tumor is located. Blood-streaked sputum, coughed up from the lungs, is the initial symptom of a small percent of lung cancers.

14. How is lung cancer diagnosed?

Initial diagnosis is by chest X-ray examination. Confirmation is by means of medical procedures such as sputum cytology, or biopsy by means of fiberoptic bronchoscopy, mediastinoscopy or by thoracotomy.*

15. What is mesothelioma?

Mesothelioma is an extremely rare cancer in the general population, but is more common among asbestos workers. It affects the pleura, a membrane lining the chest cavity, or the peritoneum, a similar membrane lining the abdominal cavity. A large proportion of mesothelioma cases can be traced to prior asbestos exposure.

*More information is available in a brochure, "Progress against Cancer of the Lung," available from the Office of Cancer Communications, National Cancer Institute, Bethesda, Maryland 20014. Living with Lung Cancer, a book in paperback form for patients, also may be helpful, and is available at nominal cost from Schmidt Printing, Inc, P.O. Box 6006, Rochester, Minnesota 55901.

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