

18. What else can a worker who was exposed occupationally to asbestos do to protect his health?

First, if still working around asbestos, he should take immediate steps to avoid additional exposure.

Second, if he hasn't smoked cigarettes he should never start. If he has, he should quit. This will reduce the risk of lung cancer, no matter how many years he has smoked. He should also be alert to other potential health hazards in the workplace.

Third, he should get regular health check-ups. His doctor should be made aware of his occupational history (for example, that he once worked in a shipyard), and provide a physical examination, that includes a chest X-ray, a lung function test, a rectal examination, and a sputum analysis. (Sputum cytology, the examination of cells in deep cough sputum samples, is a procedure still under study as a diagnostic method for lung cancer and is not widely available. However, it has shown some usefulness in studies of asbestos workers as an aid in identifying exposure.)

Lung cancer, mesothelioma, asbestosis and other serious complications of asbestos exposure are late results of asbestos-induced disease. Early X-ray changes often precede these serious consequences.

Absence of X-ray change is no guarantee of future safety. Some workers have had enough asbestos exposure to cause mesothelioma without showing earlier X-ray changes. However, in general, absence of X-ray change many years after initial exposure provides evidence of limited exposure.

19. What can be done to treat diseases that may be associated with asbestos?

Asbestosis: Most deaths from asbestosis are due to superimposed respiratory infections such as pneumonia and bronchitis, rather than to direct effects of the disease itself. These infections usually can be treated, but it is important to get medical attention early.

Lung and Esophageal Cancer: Treatment of these cancers depends on the type and amount of tissue affected. Lung cancer may be treated by surgery, drugs, radiation, or combinations of these treatments. Esophageal cancer is treated most often with radiation. As with most cancers, the treatment must be tailored to the individual patient.

Cancer of the Colon and Rectum: Surgery is curative in many cases and early diagnosis increases the likelihood of cure. Methods are available to improve the frequency of early diagnosis.

Mesothelioma of the Pleura or Peritoneum: Effective treatment is not yet available. Research is underway in the United States, Great Britain, and France to improve the treatment.

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